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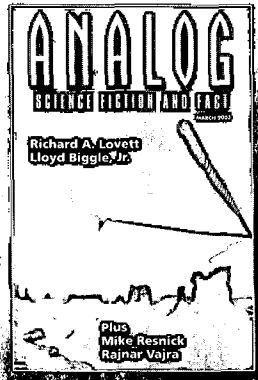

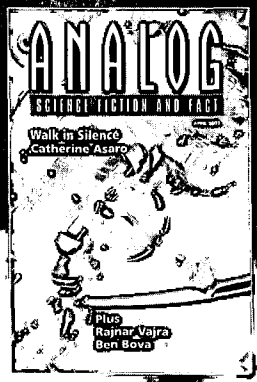

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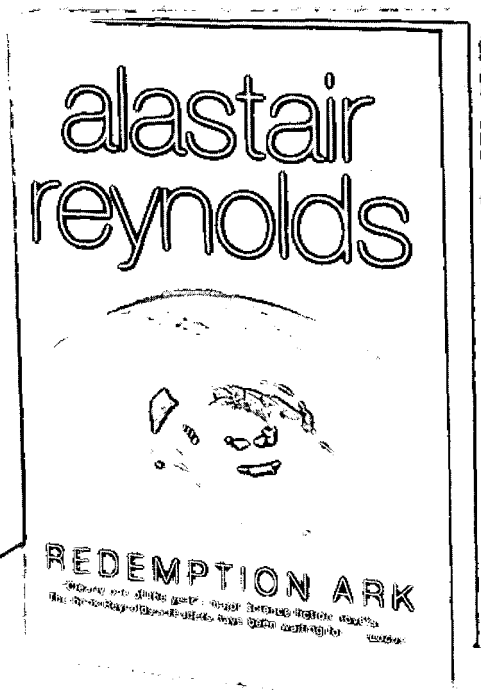

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Asimov's Science Fiction

AUGUST 2003

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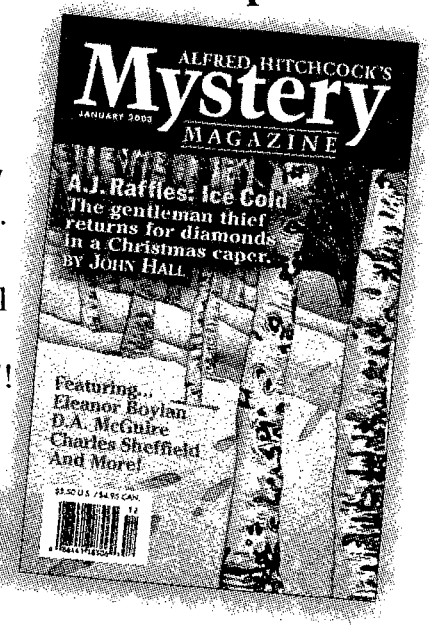

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

THEME-PARKING THE PAST

I first saw the Parthenon on a lovely autumn day in 1986. As we arrived at our hotel it was gleaming up there before us on the Acropolis of Athens, every bit as stunning a sight as I expected it to be: the elegant marble columns, the flawless design, the spectacular site at the edge of the famous hill. "I can't believe it's really there," said my wife Karen, who, like me, had known the world's most beautiful temple only from photographs. But it was. Rising right above us, just a couple of blocks away, it glowed like a beacon.

The ravages of time had made it, of course, something less than the perfect structure it had been in the days when Pericles, Sophocles, Socrates, and Plato strolled the Acropolis. Early Christians had hauled away the colossal ivory-and-gold statue of Athena and reconstructed the building's interior to make it suitable for a church. The Turks, when they captured Athens in 1478, had tacked on a minaret and converted it into a mosque. Later they used the building as a gunpowder warehouse, which exploded during a Venetian bombardment in 1687, wrecking the structure's middle and blowing off its roof. The Venetians then tried to haul away the sculptured horses from the west pediment, making a mess of the job, and most of the remaining statuary was carried off by Lord Elgin in 1801 to London, where it is still on display at the British Museum.

Nevertheless, what remains of the Parthenon is still one of the noblest sights on this planet. Karen and I, trudging around in its battered and rubble-strewn interior the next day, the umpteen-millionth tourists to do so over the centuries, were as astounded by the damaged building at close range as we had been the day before when viewing it from the street below. Perhaps it was even more powerful a sight in its maimed condition than it would have been in all its original perfection: intact, it might have seemed implausibly and excessively beautiful, unconvincing, even unreal, a mere Hollywood confection. But the fact that its glory still was able to shine through, overwhelming despite all that the building had suffered, was better testimony to the genius of its builders than if it had been entirely unscarred.

I haven't been back to Athens in the intervening decades. But apparently the Parthenon gets to look a little more like its original self every year. Archaeologists have been picking through the rubble heaps that Karen and I saw in 1986, trying to piece together the fragments of shattered columns. With the Olympics due to return to Athens in 2004, a plan had been put forth to reconstruct the six fallen columns of the east porch, and public pressure had mounted to restore the interior structures of the temple too, and even the lost roof. An outcry from architectural purists followed, and eventually a compro-

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mise emerged: three of the columns would be rebuilt, and three left as stumps. This has now been done.

The trouble is that the three new columns, even though they include much of their original marble, are a bright white. The remainder of the Parthenon, stained and pitted by the centuries, is a pinkish gray. The restorers now are experimenting with a mixture of mud, tea, and ferrous oxide solution to provide the three columns with a look of age. As for the ruined remains of the inner sanctuary, they are so fragmentary that the archaeologists don't agree on which pieces should go where, and little has been reconstructed so far.

Eventually, I suppose, we might see a shiny full-scale replica of the Parthenon sitting atop the Acropolis where the old one used to be. How good an idea, I wonder, would that be?

Those needing to see an imitation Parthenon can see one right now, by visiting Nashville, Tennessee, where a full-scale replica was constructed in 1897 to mark the city's hundredth birthday. It's a handsome building, just not Greek, nor very ancient. It certainly is real, though, made of genuine stone, not a computer simulation, not a projected image. But the older one in Athens carries an extra level of reality, since, after all, it's the original model, and though it isn't quite as pretty as the one in Nashville it is generally thought to have a certain nobility and grandeur precisely *because* of all that has been done to it. Its injuries offer profound testimony of the accretions of history through time.

I've traveled widely through what we have come to call the Old World, and I've seen plenty of renovation jobs, ranging from the minor shor-ing up of a precarious wall to the complete reconstruction of some essentially ruined site. On the island of Crete, at Knossos, I wandered through the palace of King Minos, 3500 years old, that the great archaeologist Sir Arthur Evans excavated and restored a century ago. It's an astounding site, but perhaps a little *too* astounding, because later archaeologists, working to a more exacting standard than that of the nineteenth-century pioneers, have shown that Sir Arthur may have done as much reinventing as he did reconstructing. Much of the palace of Minos, even the famous frescoes showing lithe dancers leaping over charging bulls, may have been built from scratch, reflecting Evans' views of how things *ought* to have looked. The results are breathtaking. But such Hollywood movies as *Cleopatra* and *Spartacus* gave us breathtaking views of the past, too. We are very impressed, but we still can tell the difference between a movie set and a newsreel of the authentic ancient Rome or Alexandria. Such remodeling as Sir Arthur Evans' work at Knossos blurs the line for us as we try to re-experience the broken past.

Then there's Dresden, which was destroyed by a horrendous firestorm during World War II. Its beautiful eighteenth-century palaces and museums have been rebuilt to the original design, largely using the original stones, and work is proceeding now on the last step, the reconstruction of the cathedral out of what was a huge pile of numbered stones when I was there in 1997. Is what we see today the "real" Dresden of the baroque era, or a Disneyfied replica, or some-

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thing in between? What about the newly glistening frescos on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, brighter now than they have been for centuries, perhaps brighter than they ever were? What about the paintings we see in the great museums, retouched over and over by the brushes of artful or not-so-artful restorers? Are they still the originals? The same can be asked of Berlin, where many buildings damaged in the war have been rebuilt to the old designs, and Rome, where considerable subtle reconstruction has shored up the ruins of the great monuments of the Caesars, and, indeed, at most ancient sites around the world, where encroaching vegetation has been stripped away, fallen walls re-erected and supported by hidden metal bars, statues rebuilt, often fancifully.

There are valid arguments to be made for doing this, and arguments just as valid for leaving the ruins alone. Will rebuilding the giant Buddhas of Bamyan, destroyed by the Taliban, give us anything more than a theme-park imitation of what was lost? I don't think the Parthenon as I saw it in 1986 needed any improvements, but what if the whole thing had been obliterated, rather than merely damaged, by that powder-magazine explosion three centuries earlier? Would the Greeks be justified in building a brand new Parthenon today, and would we revere it as we do the maimed but authentic one? It's difficult to say. The past *does* inevitably disappear, and sometimes there's value in constructing a reminder of what once had been, so long as we don't confuse it with the original. Perhaps some sites should be stabilized against further harm and left otherwise alone, some part-

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ly reconstructed, and some built anew, but I wouldn't want to be the one who decides what to do where.

The year before I went to Greece, *Asimov's* published my novella "Sailing to Byzantium," which is set in such a far-future world that nothing at all remains of what we recognize as the past, and the people of the day amuse themselves by building replicas of five or six ancient sites, taking short holidays at them, and tearing them down to be replaced by other replicas. The story opens in Alexandria, where the Lighthouse, the seventh wonder of the world, exists again, along with the famed Library and all the palaces and temples. Then it moves on to Chang-an, an early capital of China, and then to the prehistoric Indian site of Mohenjo-daro, before concluding amidst the glories of Byzantium. Rome of the Caesars, a recent reconstruction, has already been dismantled, and so, too, has Timbuktu: "This is not a place any longer," my protagonist is told, when he tries to go there. And there is a full schedule of other sites to be rebuilt in the years ahead: Nineveh, Florence of the Medici, Babylon, Troy, Tenochtitlan, and even, perhaps, New York City, complete with its World Trade Center (this in 1985!).

But these far-future folk are indiscriminate in their attitude toward "reality." One of the five currently reconstituted cities, as the story begins, is Asgard, the capital of the Norse gods, which, so far as we know, existed only in Nordic poetry. And the reconstruction of Alexandria includes not only exact replicas of the Lighthouse and the Library but such fanciful creatures out of mythology as live centaurs and sphinxes. It is all the same to the reconstructors, fact and fantasy all part of the aggregate totality of the lost but still remembered past.

Perhaps it's for the best that way. The past is over, after all. It lives on only as fragmentary bits of recollected memory, as more or less accurate accounts in books, and as broken remains of surviving structures. Why not mix a little fantasy in, for greater effect? We can never have the "real" past again. We can only guess at what it was really like; and all we have to go by are the fragments, which grow ever less identical to their originals every year. Eventually even the fragments decay beyond recognition or comprehension. Rebuilding them, reimagining what once had been, keeps the past alive, after a fashion, and perhaps that should be sufficient for us. Perhaps. ○

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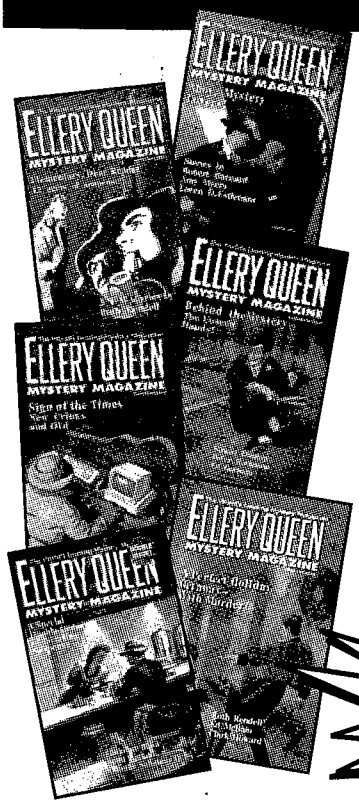

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TOUCHING CENTAURI

Stephen Baxter

Stephen Baxter's most recent book, *Revolutions in the Earth* (Gollancz UK), is a non-fiction biography of James Hutton, the Scottish geologist who discovered the true age of our planet. Mr. Baxter is currently working on a new series of novels based around the "Xeelee galactic war" universe of many of his recent stories for *Asimov's*. The first book, *Coalescent*, is due from Del Rey next February. He's also at work on a new collaborative series called "A Time Odyssey" with Sir Arthur C. Clarke. *Time's Eye*, the first of these novels about alien intervention, will be out from Del Rey sometime next year.

Kate Manzoni was there the day Reid Malenfant poked a hole in the wall of reality.

When she arrived in the auditorium, Malenfant was speaking from a podium. "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to JPL, and the climax of Project Michelangelo. This truly is a historic moment. For today, June 14, 2025, we are anticipating the returned echo of the laser pulse we fired at the planet Alpha Centauri A-4, more than eight years ago. . . ."

It was her first glimpse of Malenfant. He stood in a forest of microphones, a glare of TV lights. To either side of Malenfant, Kate recognized Cornelius Taine, the reclusive mathematician (and rumored autistic) who had come up with the idea for the project, and Vice President Maura Della, spry seventy-something, who had pushed the funding through Congress.

Kate was here for the human angle, and by far the most interesting human in this room was Malenfant himself. But right now he was still talking like a press release.

"Four light years out, four light years back: it has been a long journey for our beam of light, and only a handful of plucky photons will make it home. But we'll be here to greet them—and think what it means. Today, we will have proof that our monkey fingers have touched Centauri. . . ."

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Kate allowed her attention to drift.

JPL, the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, had turned out to look like a small hospital, squashed into a cramped and smoggy Pasadena-suburb site dominated by the green shoulders of the San Gabriel Mountains. This was the von Karman auditorium, the scene of triumphant news conferences when JPL had sent probes to almost every planet in the solar system. Heady days—but long gone now, and JPL had been returned to the Army to do weapons research, its original purpose.

Well, today the big old auditorium was crowded again, with mission managers and scientists and politicians and journalists—like Kate herself—all crammed in among the softscreen terminals. Camera drones drifted like party balloons overhead, or darted like glittering insects through the air.

She walked past display stands, between scrolling softscreen images and bullshitting nerd-scientist types, all eager to lecture the gathered lay folk on the wonders of Project Michelangelo.

She could learn, for example, how the planets of the twin star system Alpha Centauri had first been detected back in 2010, by a European Space Agency planet-hunter probe called Eddington. Working with robotic patience in the silence of space, Eddington had detected minute oscillations in Alpha A's brightness: the signature of a whole system of planets passing before the star's face.

Of most interest was the fourth planet out, Alpha A-4. Not much bigger than Earth, A-4 orbited in the so-called Goldilocks zone: not too far from its sun for water to freeze, not so close to be too hot for life. Follow-up studies had shown that A-4's atmosphere contained methane. What was significant about that was that it was chemically unstable: there had to be some mechanism to inject such a reactive gas into A-4's unseen air.

Most likely candidate: life.

But still, despite these exciting hints, A-4 was little more than a dot of light, huddled blurrily close to its sun. There were plans underway to launch high-resolution space telescopes to image the continents and oceans of this second Earth, as everybody hoped it would turn out to be.

But now, ahead of all that, here was Reid Malenfant fronting up Project Michelangelo: an audacious attempt to bounce a laser beam off a planet of Alpha Centauri.

Malenfant had come down off his podium. Standing under an image of Michelangelo's God and Adam—the famous fingertip touch that had become a clichéd icon for this kind of endeavor—he was mixing with the journos and pols and various VIP types at the front of the auditorium. Everybody was talking at once, though not to each other, all of them yammering into com systems mounted on their wrists and lapels.

But even so, for this bitty, distracted audience, Malenfant was holding forth about life in space. "For me, the whole course of my life has been dominated by a simple question: *Where is everybody?* Even as a kid, I knew that the Earth was just a ball of rock, on the fringe of a nondescript galaxy. I just couldn't believe that there was nobody out *there* looking back at me down *here*. . . ." In his sixties, Malenfant was tall, wiry slim, with a bald head shining like a piece of machinery. Close to, he looked what

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he was: a grounded astronaut, ridiculously fit, tanned deep. "I lapped up everything I could find on how space is a high frontier, a sky to be mined, a resource for humanity. All that stuff shaped my life. But is that *all* there is to it? Is the sky really nothing more than an empty stage for mankind? But if not, *where are they*? This is called the Fermi Paradox. . . ."

He fell silent, gazing at Kate, who had managed to worm her way to the front of the loose pack. He glanced at her name-tag. "Ms. Manzoni. From—?"

"I'm freelancing today." She forced a smile. She could smell desert dust on him, hot and dry as a sauna.

"And you think there's a story in the Fermi Paradox?"

She shrugged, non-committal. "I'm more interested in you, Colonel Malenfant."

He was immediately suspicious, even defensive. "Just Malenfant."

"Of all the projects you could have undertaken when you were grounded, why front a stunt like this?"

He shrugged. "Look, if you want to call this a stunt, fine. But we're extending the envelope here. Today we'll prove that we can touch other worlds. Maybe an astronaut is the right face to head up a groundbreaker project like this."

"Ex-astronaut."

His grin faded.

Fishing for an angle, she said, "Is that why you're here? You were born in 1960, weren't you? So you remember Apollo. But by the time you grew up, cheaper and smarter robots had taken over the exploring. Now NASA says that when the International Space Station finally reaches the end of its life, it plans no more manned spaceflight of any sort. Is this laser project a compensation for your wash-out, Malenfant?"

He barked a laugh. "You know, you aren't as smart as you think you are, Ms. Manzoni. It's your brand of personality-oriented cod-psychology bullshit that has brought down—"

"Are you lonely?"

That pulled him up. "What?"

"The Fermi Paradox is all about loneliness, isn't it?—the loneliness of mankind, orphaned in an empty universe. . . . Your wife, Emma, died a decade back. I know you have a son, but you never remarried—"

He glared at her. "You're full of shit, lady."

She returned his glare, satisfied she had hit the mark.

But as she prepared her next question, the auditorium crowd took up chanting along with a big softscreen clock: ". . . Twenty! . . . Nineteen! . . . Eighteen! . . ." She looked away, distracted, and Malenfant took the opportunity to move away from her.

She worked her way through the crowd until she could see the big softscreen display at the front of the auditorium. It was a tapestry of more-or-less incomprehensible graphic and digital updates.

She prepared her floating camera drones, and the various pieces of recording technology embedded in her flesh and clothing. The truth was, whatever data came back with those interstellar photons wouldn't matter; today's iconic image would be that pure instant of triumph when that

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faint echo returned from Alpha A-4, and those graphs and charts leapt into jagged animation. And that, and the accompanying swirl of emotions, would be what she must capture.

But in the midst of her routine she found room for a sliver of wonder. This was, after all, about reaching out to a second Earth, just as Malenfant had said—maybe it was a stunt, but *what* a stunt. . . .

Everybody was growing quiet, all faces turned up to the big softscreen.

The ticking clock moved into the positive.

The shimmering graphs remained flatlined.

There was silence. Then, as nothing continued to happen, a mutter of conversation.

Kate was baffled. *There had been no echo.* How could that be? She knew this was an experiment that would have been accurate to a fraction of a second; there was no possibility of a time error. Either the receiving equipment had somehow failed to work—or else the laser pulse from Earth had gone sailing right through planet Alpha A-4 as if it were an image painted on glass. . . .

She peered around frantically, trying to get a first impression of the principals' reaction. She saw the back of Malenfant's head as he stared stolidly at the unresponsive screen, as if willing the displays to change. Veep Della frowned and stroked her chin.

Cornelius Taine was grinning.

Something is very, very wrong here. And you want to know something else?

Kate floated in the dark, freed of gravity and sensation, listening to her own voice.

"Tell me," she whispered.

It's getting wronger. They tested the whole set-up the day before with a bounce off a deep space comet a hundred astronomical units out—twice as far as Pluto. I happen to know they repeated the echo test off that same comet a few hours after *the Centauri experiment failed.*

"And they couldn't find the comet."

You're getting the idea. Michelangelo shouldn't have failed. It couldn't *have failed. . . .*

This was one of her virtual correspondents, an entity (maybe multiple) she knew only as Rodent, his/her/their anonymity protected by layers of encryption and chaff. But the transmission was encoded in her own voice; she liked to imagine it was the other half of herself, dreaming-Kate whispering across her corpus callosum, that bridge between her brain's hemispheres within which was embedded the implant that had dropped her into this virtual world.

But the images that floated before her now, of angular, expensive machinery, had come from no dream.

The laser burst was generated in low Earth orbit by a nuclear fusion pulse. A trillion watts of power compressed into a fraction of a second. They have been building toys like this for decades, at places like Lawrence Livermore. Got a big boost under Gore-Clinton, and even more under Clinton-Clinton. . . .

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Much had been learned about other worlds, even from Earth, by techniques like Michelangelo's: the cloud-shrouded surface of Venus had first been studied by radar beams emitted from giant ground-based radio telescopes, for instance. But Alpha A-4 was more than seven *thousand* times as far away as Pluto, the solar system's outermost planet. Michelangelo's vast outreaching was orders of magnitude more difficult than anything attempted before—and in some quarters had been criticized as premature.

Maybe those critics had been proved right. "So the experiment failed. It happens."

Kate, the laser worked. Look, they could see the damn pulse as it was fired off into the dark.

"But that's just the first step. You're talking about a shot across four light years, of projecting planetary movements across four years' duration." The scientists had had to aim their pulse, not at A-4 itself, but at the place A-4 was expected to be by the time the light pulse got there. It had been a speed-of-light pigeon shoot—but a shoot of staggering precision. "And Alpha Centauri is a triple star; what if the planet's motions were perturbed, or—"

A-4 is so close to its parent that its orbit is as stable as Earth's. Kate, believe me, this is just Newtonian clockwork; the predictions couldn't have gone wrong. Likewise the geometry of the reflection. Once those photons were launched, an echo had to come back home.

"Then maybe the receiving equipment is faulty."

They were watching for those photons with equipment on Earth, in low Earth orbit, on the Moon, and with the big Trojan-point radio telescope array. Short of the sun going nova, what fault could take down all of that? Kate, Michelangelo had *to work. There are inquiries going on at every level from the lab boys to the White House, but they'll all conclude the same damn thing.*

In swam an image of Malenfant, justifying himself on some TV show. "There's nothing wrong with our technology," he was saying. "So maybe there is something wrong with the universe. . . ."

See?

Kate sighed. "So what's the story? Obscure space experiment fails in unexplained manner. . . . There's no meat in that sandwich."

Do what you do best. Focus on the people. Go find Malenfant. And ask him about Voyager.

"Voyager—the spacecraft?"

You know, when it fires, that damn laser destroys itself. Makes a single cry to the stars, then dies, a billion dollars burned up in a fraction of a second. Kind of a neat metaphor for our wonderful military-industrial complex, don't you think?

She failed to find Malenfant. She did find his son. She cleared her desk and went to see him, two days after the failed experiment.

Meanwhile, so far as she could see, the world continued to turn, people went about their business, and the news was the usual buzz of politics and personalities—of Earthbound matters like the water war in the Sa-

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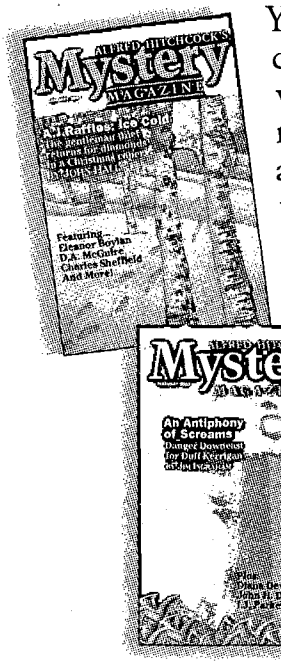

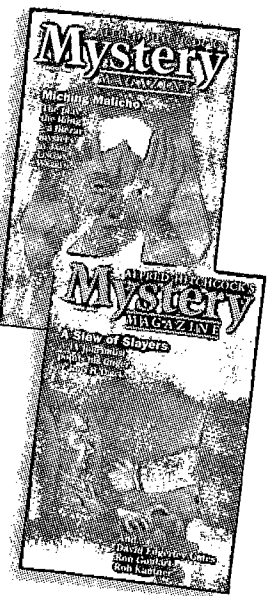

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hel, the latest Chinese incursion into depopulated Russia, the Attorney General's continuing string of extra-marital affairs.

Most people knew about the strange news from Alpha Centauri. Few seemed to think it mattered. The truth was, for all the mutterings of Rodent and his ilk, she wasn't sure herself. She still sensed there was a story here, however.

And she was growing a little scared.

Mike Malenfant, aged thirty, lived with his wife, Saranne, in a suburb of Houston called Clear Lake.

He opened the door. "Oh. Ms. Manzoni."

"Call me Kate. . . . Have we met?"

"No." He grinned at her. "But Malenfant told me about you, and what you said to him the night of Michelangelo. Seemed to bug him more than the failure itself."

She thought, He calls his dad by his *surname?* Father-son rivalry? He didn't look much like his father: rounder, smaller, with dense black hair he must have inherited from his mother. "Uh, would you rather I left?"

"No. My dad is a little 1970s sometimes. I don't have a problem with what you do. How did you find me? We keep our name out of the books."

That wouldn't have stopped her, she thought. But it had been easier than that. "I played a hunch. Malenfant used to live here, with Emma. So I guessed—"

He grinned again. "You guessed right. Malenfant will be even more pissed to know he's so predictable." He took her indoors and introduced his wife, Saranne: pretty, heavily pregnant, tired-looking. "Tea?"

With a camera drone hovering discreetly at her shoulder, Kate began gently to interview the couple.

Close to the Johnson Space Center, Clear Lake was a place of retro-chic wooden-framed houses backing onto the fractal-edged water. This had long been a favored domicile of NASA astronauts and their families. When Malenfant's career had taken him away from Houston and NASA, son Mike had happily—so it seemed—taken over the house he had grown up in, with its battered rowboat still tied up at the back.

Some of what Mike had to say—about the life of a soft-muscled, intellectual boy growing up as the son of America's favorite maverick astronaut—was illuminating, and might make a useful color piece one day. So Kate wasn't being entirely dishonest. But her main objective, of course, was to keep them talking until Malenfant showed up—as he surely would, since she'd sent a provocative note to his message service to say she was coming.

Mike hadn't followed his father's career path. He had become a virtual character designer, moderately successful in his own right. Now, with his business-partner wife expecting their first child, this was maybe a peak time of his life. But even so, he didn't seem to resent the unspoken and obvious truth: that Kate was here because he was Malenfant's son, not for himself alone.

One thing that was immediately nailed home in her awareness was how much Mike—and, it seemed, Malenfant himself—missed Emma:

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Mike's mother, Malenfant's wife, taken away by cancer before she was forty. She wondered how much of a difference it might have made to everybody's lives if Emma had survived.

As the low afternoon sun started to glint off the stretch of lake out back, the old man arrived.

He launched into her as soon as he walked in the door. "Ms. Manzoni, the great pap-peddler. You aren't welcome here. This is my son's home, and I have a job to do. So why don't you take your drones and your implants and shove them up—"

"As far as the implants are concerned," Kate said dryly, "somebody already did that for me."

That got a laugh out of Mike, and the mood softened a little.

But Malenfant kept up his glare. "What do you want, Manzoni?"

"Tell me about *Voyager*," she said.

Mike and Saranne looked quizzical. Malenfant looked away.

Aha, she thought.

"*Voyager*," she said to Mike and Saranne. "Two space probes designed to explore the outer planets, launched in the 1970s. Now they are floating out of the solar system. About a decade ago, they crossed the heliopause—the place where the star winds blow, the boundary of interstellar space—right, Malenfant? But the *Voyagers* are still working, even now, and the big radio telescopes can still pick up their feeble signals. . . . A heroic story, in its way."

Mike shrugged. "So, a history lesson. And?"

"And now something's happened to them. That's all I know."

Malenfant was stony-faced, arms folded.

For a moment, it looked like the situation was developing into an impasse. But then, to Kate's surprise, Saranne stepped forward, hands resting on her belly. "Maybe you should tell her what she wants to know, Malenfant."

It was as if Malenfant was suddenly aware she was there. "Why?"

"There's a lot of buzz about your experiment." Saranne was dark, her eyes startling blue. "There's something strange going on, isn't there? Don't you think we have a right to know about it?"

Malenfant softened. "Saranne—it's not so easy. Sometimes there is no use asking questions, because there are no meaningful answers."

Kate frowned. "And sometimes there are answers, but there's nothing to be done—is that it, Malenfant? Don't tell the children the truth, for fear of frightening them—"

His anger returned. "This has nothing the hell to do with you."

Saranne said, "Come on, Malenfant. If she's found something out, so will everybody else soon enough. This isn't 1960—"

He barked a bitter laugh.

"*Voyager*," Kate prompted.

"*Voyager*. Okay. Yesterday, the Deep Space Network lost contact with the spacecraft. Both *Voyagers* 1 and 2. Within a couple of hours."

Mike said, "Is that so significant? They were creaky old relics. They were going to fade out sometime."

Malenfant eyed his son. "Both together? After so long? How likely is

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that? And anyhow, we had a handle on how much power they had left. It shouldn't have happened."

Kate said, "Was this after the comet, or before?"

Mike said, "What comet?"

"The one that went missing when your father's laser tried to echo-sound it."

Malenfant frowned. Evidently he hadn't expected her to know about that either. "After," he said. "After the comet."

Kate tried to put it together in her head. A series of anomalies, then: that missing planet of Alpha Centauri, a comet out in the dark, the lonely *Voyagers*. All evaporating.

Each event a little closer to the sun.

Something is coming this way, she thought. Like footprints in the dew.

A softscreen chimed; Mike left the room to answer it.

Malenfant kept up his glare. "Come on, Manzoni. Forget *Voyager*. What do you really want here?"

Kate glanced at Malenfant and Saranne, and took another flyer. "What's the source of the tension between you two?"

Malenfant snapped, "Don't answer."

But Saranne said evenly, "It's this." She stroked her bump. "Baby Michael." She watched Malenfant's uncomfortable reaction. "See? He's not even happy with the fact that we know Michael's sex, that we named him before his birth."

"You know it's not that," Malenfant growled.

Kate made a guess, "Has the child been enhanced?"

"Nothing outrageous," Saranne said quickly. "Anti-aging treatments: telomerase, thymus, and pineal gland adjustments. In the womb, he's been farmed for stem cells and organ clones. And we chose a few regenerative options: regrowing fingers, toes, and spinal column. . . ."

"He'll be able to hibernate," Malenfant said, his tone dangerously even. "Like a goddamn bear. And he might live forever. Nobody knows."

"He's going to grow up in a dangerous world. He needs all the help he can get."

Malenfant said, "He's your kid. You can do what you like."

"He's your grandson. I wish I had your blessing." But her tone was cool; Kate saw that she was winning this battle.

Malenfant turned on Kate. "How about your family, Ms. Manzoni?"

She shrugged. "My parents split when I was a kid. I haven't seen my father since. My mother—"

"Another broken home. Jesus."

"It's not a big deal, Malenfant. I was the last in my high school class *not* to go through a parental divorce." She smiled at Saranne, who smiled back.

But Malenfant, visibly unhappy, was lashing out at Kate, where he couldn't at Saranne. "What kind of way to live is that? It's as if we're all crazy!"

Saranne said carefully, "Malenfant has a certain amount of difficulty with the modern world."

Kate said, "Malenfant, I don't believe you're such a sour old man. You ought to be happy for Saranne and Mike."

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Saranne said, "And I sure have the right to do the best for my kid, Malenfant."

"Yes. Yes, you do," he said. "And the responsibility. God knows I admire you for that. But can't you see that if *everyone* does what's best for themselves alone, we're all going to hell in a handbasket? What kind of world will it be where the rich can buy immortality, while the poor continue to starve as fast as they breed?"

Kate thought she understood. "You always look to the big picture, Malenfant. The Fermi Paradox, the destiny of mankind. Right? But most people don't think like that. Most people focus the way Saranne is focused, on whatever is best for their own kids. What else can we do?"

"Take a look around. We're living in the world that kind of thinking has created."

She forced a smile. "We'll muddle through."

"If we get the chance," Malenfant said coldly.

Mike came back into the room, looking stunned. "That was the vice president. There's a helicopter on the way from Ellington Air Force Base. For you, Malenfant."

Malenfant said, "I'll be damned."

Saranne looked scared. "The vice president?"

Kate frowned. "Malenfant, don't you think you should find out what's going on before you get to Washington?" She walked to a wall and slapped it, opening up its comms facilities. "Maybe you ought to ask Cornelius Taine."

"Ask him what?"

She thought quickly, wondering where those footsteps would next fall. What was the furthest planet from the sun? . . . "Pluto. Ask him about Pluto."

Malenfant evidently didn't enjoy being told what to do by the likes of Kate Manzoni. But he punched in ident codes, and began to interact with a small patch of the wall.

Kate and the others waited; it wasn't a moment for small talk. Kate strained to hear the sounds of the chopper.

At length, Malenfant straightened up. Before him, embedded in the smart wall, was an image of a planet: blue, streaked with white cloud.

Kate's heart thumped. "Earth?"

He shook his head. "And not Pluto either. This is a live image of Neptune. Almost as far out as Pluto. A strange blue world, blue as Earth, on the edge of interstellar space. . . ."

Saranne said uneasily, "What's wrong with it?"

"Not Neptune itself. Triton, its moon. Look." He pointed to a blurred patch of light, close to Neptune's ghostly limb. When he tapped the wall, the patch moved, quite suddenly. Another tap, another move. Kate couldn't see any pattern to the moves, as if the moon was no longer following a regular orbit.

"I don't understand," she said.

"Triton has started to . . . flicker. It hops around its orbit—or adopts another orbit entirely—or sometimes it vanishes, or is replaced by a ring system." He scratched his bald pate. "According to Cornelius, Triton was

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an oddity—circling Neptune backwards—probably created in some ancient collision event."

"Even odder now," Mike said dryly.

"Cornelius says that all these images—the multiple moons, the rings—are all *possibilities*, alternate outcomes of how that ancient collision might have come about. As if other realities are folding down into our own." He searched their faces, seeking understanding.

Mike said, "Malenfant, what has this to do with your laser shot?"

Malenfant spread his hands. "Mike, I talk big, but we humans are pretty insignificant in the bigger scheme of things. Out there in the dark, somebody is playing pool with a moon. How can we have affected *that*?"

Kate took a breath. *Neptune*: a long way away, out in the dark, where the planets are cloudy spheres, and the sun's light is weak and rectilinear. But out there, she thought, something strange is stirring: something with awesome powers indeed, beyond human comprehension.

And it's coming this way. Whatever *it* is. She shuddered, and suppressed the urge to cross herself.

Saranne asked, "Are the stars still shining?"

It struck Kate as an odd, naïve question, but Malenfant seemed touched. "Yes," he said gently. "Yes, the stars are still shining."

Kate heard the flap of chopper blades. On impulse she snapped, "Malenfant—take me with you."

He laughed and turned away.

Mike said, "Maybe you should do it, Malenfant. I have the feeling she's smarter than you. Somebody needs to be thinking when you meet the vice president."

Malenfant turned to Kate. "Quite a story you're building up here, Manzoni."

If, she thought, I ever get to file it.

Outside, the noise of the descending chopper mounted. The reddening evening light dappled on the water of the lake, as it had always done, as if the strange lights in the sky were of no more import than a bad dream.

The limo pulled away. Malenfant, in his Navy uniform, was tweaking his cuffs. A blank-faced young soldier waited at his arm, ready to escort them into the building.

The vice president's official residence was a rambling brick mansion on a broad green lawn, set at the corner of 34th Street and Massachusetts Avenue. Kate, who wasn't as accustomed to Washington as she liked to pretend, thought it looked oddly friendly, like a small-town museum, rather than a major center of federal power.

Beyond the security fence, city life went on as usual, a stream of Smart-driven traffic washing with oily precision along the street, tourists and office workers drifting along the sidewalk, speaking into the air to remote contacts. Malenfant said, "You wouldn't think the damn sky was about to fall, would you?"

"Everybody knows as much as we do," she said. "Nothing stays secret. So how come there isn't—"

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"Panic buying?" he grinned. "Rutting in the streets? Running for the hills? Because we don't get it, Manzoni. Look in your heart. *You* don't believe it, do you? Not deep down. We're not programmed to look further than the other guy's nose."

Unexpectedly, the young soldier spoke up. "'This is the way I think the world will end—with general giggling by all the witty heads, who think it is a joke.'" They looked at him, surprised. "Kierkegaard. Sorry, sir. If you're ready, will you follow me?"

When they reached Maura Della's office, Cornelius Taine was already there, sitting bolt uptight on one of the overstuffed armchairs, already talking.

"Past speculation on artificial realities provides us with clues as to our likely response to finding ourselves in a 'planetarium.' You may remember movies in which the protagonist is the unwitting star of a TV show or movie, who invariably tries to escape. But the idea that the world around us may not be real reaches back to Plato, who wondered if what we see resembles the flickering shadows on a cave wall. And the notion of *creating* deceptive artificial environments dates back at least as far as Descartes, who, in the seventeenth century, speculated on the philosophical implications of a sense-manipulating 'demon'—effectively a pre-technological virtual-reality generator. . . ."

Della, listening, waved Malenfant and Kate to seats. Kate selected an expensive-looking upright that creaked under her weight.

The office was large and spacious. The furniture was stuffed leather, the big desk polished mahogany, the wallpaper and carpets lush. But Maura Della had stamped her personality on the room; on every wall were cycling softscreen images of the surfaces of Mars and Io, the gloomy oceans of Europa, a deep-space image of a galaxy field.

Malenfant leaned forward. "*Planetarium?* What the hell are you talking about, Cornelius?"

Cornelius regarded him coolly. "The logic is compelling, Malenfant. Your own logic: the Fermi Paradox, which you claim has driven your life. The Paradox defies our intuition, as well as philosophical principles such as the assumption of mediocrity, that it is only on our own apparently com-

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monplace world that mind has evolved. The Paradox is surely telling us that something is fundamentally wrong with our view of the universe, and our place in it."

Malenfant prompted, "And so. . . ."

"And so, perhaps the reason that the universe does not appear to make sense is that *what we see around us is artificial*."

Malenfant let his mouth drop open.

Kate sat as still as she could, unsure how to react.

They were both looking at the vice president, waiting for her lead.

Della sighed. "I know how this sounds. But Cornelius is here at my invitation, Malenfant. Look, I have plenty of people explaining the *rational* possibilities to me. Perhaps we're in the middle of some huge solar storm, for instance, which is disrupting communications. Perhaps the solar system has wandered into a knot of interstellar gas, or even dark matter, which is refracting or diffusing electromagnetic radiation, including your laser beam—"

"None of which hangs together," Kate guessed.

Della frowned at her. Malenfant quickly introduced Kate as a personal aide.

Della said, "Okay. You're right. Nobody has come up with anything that works. It isn't just a question of some new anomaly; we have a situation for which, as far as I understand it, no explanation within our physical law is *even possible*. . . . But here is Cornelius, with a proposal that is frankly outrageous—"

"But an outrageous problem requires outrageous proposals," Cornelius said, his smile cold.

Malenfant said, "Just tell me what you're talking about, Cornelius."

Cornelius went on, "Think about it. What if we have been placed in some form of 'planetarium,' perhaps generated using an advanced virtual reality technology, designed to give us the illusion of an empty universe—while beyond the walls with their painted stars, the shining lights of extraterrestrial civilizations glow unseen?"

"Which would resolve Fermi," Malenfant said. "They're there, but they are hiding."

"Which would resolve Fermi, yes."

"And now the planetarium's, uh, projector is breaking down. Hence A-4, Neptune and the rest. Is that what you're saying?"

"Exactly."

Kate thought it over. "That's what the Fermi experts call a zoo hypothesis."

Cornelius looked impressed. "So it is."

"It belongs in a zoo," Malenfant said. "For one thing, it's paranoid. It's classic circular logic: you could never disprove it. We could never detect that we were in a planetarium because it's *designed* not to be detected. Right?"

"Malenfant, the fact that a hypothesis is paranoid doesn't make it wrong."

Della said, "Let me see if I understand you, Cornelius. You're suggesting that not everything we see is real. *How* much of everything?"

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Cornelius shrugged. "There are several possible answers. It depends on how far the boundary of 'reality' is set from the human consciousness. The crudest design would be like a traditional planetarium, in which we—our bodies—and the objects we touch are real, while the sky is a fake dome."

Malenfant nodded. "So the stars and galaxies are simulated by a great shell surrounding the solar system."

"But," said Kate, "it would surely take a lot to convince us. Photons of starlight are real entities that interact with our instruments and eyes."

Malenfant said, thinking, "And you'd have to simulate not just photons but such exotica as cosmic rays and neutrinos. You're talking about some impressive engineering."

Cornelius waved a hand, as if impatient with their ill-informed speculation. "These are details. If the controllers anticipate our technological progress, perhaps even now they are readying the gravity-wave generators. . . ."

"And what," asked Della, "if the boundary is closer in than that?"

Cornelius said, "There are various possibilities. Perhaps we humans are real, but some—or all—of the objects we see around us are generated as simulations, tangible enough to interact with our senses."

"Holograms," Kate said. "We are surrounded by holograms."

"Yes. But with solidity. Taste, smell. . . ."

Malenfant frowned. "That's kind of a brute-force way of doing it. You'd have to form actual material objects, all out of some kind of controlling rays. How? Think of the energy required, the control, the heat. . . . And you'd have to load them with a large amount of information, of which only a fraction would actually interact with *us* to do the fooling."

Della said, "And would these hologram objects be evanescent—like the images on a TV screen? In that case they would need continual refreshing—yes?"

Again, Cornelius seemed impatient; this is a man not used to being questioned, Kate saw. "It is straightforward to think of more *efficient* design strategies. For example, allowing objects once created to exist as quasi-autonomous entities within the environment, only loosely coupled to the controlling mechanism. This would obviate the need, for example, to reproduce continually the substance at the center of the Earth, with which we never interact directly. But any such compromise is a step back from perfection. With sufficient investment, you see, the controllers would have *full control* of the maintained environment."

Della said, "What would that mean?"

Cornelius shrugged. "The controllers could make objects appear or disappear at will. The whole Earth, if necessary. For example."

There was a brief silence.

Della got out of her chair and faced the window. She flexed her hands, and pressed her fingertips against the sunlit desk top, as if testing its reality. "You know, I find it hard to believe we're having this conversation. Anything else?"

Cornelius said, "A final possibility is that *even our bodies are simulated*, so that the boundary of reality is drawn around our very consciousness.

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We can already think of crude ways of doing this." He nodded at Kate. "For example, the fashionable implants in the corpus callosum that allow the direct downloading of virtual-reality sensations into the consciousness."

"If that was so," said Della, "how could we ever tell?"

Cornelius shook his head. "If the simulation was good enough, we could not. And there would be nothing we could do about it. But I don't think we are in that situation."

"How do you know?"

"*Because the simulation is going wrong*. Alpha A-4, the evaporation of the Oort Cloud, Neptune, the vanishing of Saturn's rings. . . ."

Kate hadn't heard about Saturn; she found room for a brief, and surprising, stab of regret.

"I think," said Cornelius, "that we should assume we are in a planetarium of the second type I listed. We are 'real.' But not everything around us is genuine."

Della turned and leaned on her desk, her knuckles white. "Cornelius, whatever the cause, this wave of anomalies is working its way toward us. There is going to be panic; you can bet on that."

Cornelius frowned. "Not until the anomalies are visible in our own sky. Most of us have remarkably limited imaginations." His cool gaze met the vice president's. "The advance of the anomaly wave is actually quite well understood. Its progression is logarithmic; it is slowing as it approaches the sun. We can predict to the hour when effects will become visible to Earth's population. That is, we can predict when the panicking will begin."

Kate asked, "How long?"

"Five more days. The precise numbers have been posted." He smiled, cold, analytical. "You have time to prepare, madam Vice President. And if it is cloudy, Armageddon will no doubt be postponed by a few hours."

Della glowered at him. "You're a damn cold fish, Cornelius. If you're right—what do you suggest we do?"

"Do?" The question seemed to puzzle him. "Why—rejoice. Rejoice that the façade is cracking, that the truth will soon be revealed."

A phone chimed, startling them all. Malenfant looked abstractedly into the air while an insect voice buzzed in his ear.

He turned to Kate. "It's Saranne. She's gone into labor."

The meeting broke up. Kate followed Malenfant out of the room, frustrated she hadn't gotten to ask the most important questions of all:

What controllers?

And, what do they want?

Her own voice wafted out of the dark.

You know who's really taking a bath over this? The astrologers. Those planets swimming around the sky are turning their fancy predictions into mush. And if this is *the end of the world, how come none of them saw it coming?* . . .

It was the fourth day after the Alpha echo had failed to return. Three days left, if Cornelius was right, until . . .

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Until what?

"Don't talk about astrology," she whispered. "Tell me about reality."

. . . Okay. Why do we believe that the universe is real? Starting with Bishop Berkeley, the solipsists have wondered if the apparently external world is contained within the observer's imagination—just as this virtual abyss we share is contained within the more limited imagination of a bank of computers.

"I don't see how you could disprove that."

Right. But when Boswell asked Dr. Johnson about the impossibility of refuting Berkeley's theory, Johnson kicked a large rock and said, "I refute it thus." What Johnson meant was that when the rock "kicked back" at his foot, he either had to formulate a theory of physical law that explained the existence and behavior of the rock—or else assume that his imagination was itself a complex, autonomous universe containing laws that precisely simulated the existence of the rock—which would therefore, imagination plus rock, be a more complex system. You see? If we're in a planetarium, there must be some vast hidden mechanism that controls everything we see. It's simpler to assume that what looks real is real.

"Occam's razor."

Sure. But Occam's razor is a guide, not a law of physics. . . . And turn it around. What if the universe is *a simulation? Then we can use Dr. Johnson's criterion to figure out what is required of the controllers.*

"I don't understand."

The model universe must have a lot of industrial-strength properties. For instance, it must be consistent. Right? In principle, anybody anywhere could perform a scientific experiment of the finest detail on any sample of the universe and its contents, and find the fabric of reality yielding consistent results. The rocks have always got to "kick back" in the same way, no matter where and how we kick them. So you have to build your cage that way. Expensive, right?

And the environment has to be self-contained: no explanations of anything inside should ever require the captives to postulate an outside. Kate, I bet if you had been born in this darkness you could figure out that there has to be something beyond. How could your consciousness have emerged from this formless mush?

And so on. The technical challenge of achieving such a deep and consistent simulation should not be underestimated—and nor should the cost. . . . Oh. It just reached Jupiter. Wow, what a spectacle. You want to see?

Her field of view filled up abruptly with fragmentary images, bits of cloud fractally laced, stained salmon pink.

She turned away, and the images disappeared.

Strange thought, isn't it? What if Cornelius is right? Here you are in one virtual reality, which is in turn contained within another. Layers of nested unreality, Kate. . . .

Kate felt a sudden revulsion. "Wake up, wake up."

For long minutes, she immersed herself in gritty reality: the pine scent that came from the open window of her bedroom, the song of the birds, the slow tick of the old-fashioned clock on the wall.

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On impulse, she closed her eyes. "Wake up. Wake up."
The clock continued to tick, the birds to sing.

Civil defense programs were activated, Cold War bunkers reopened, food stocks laid down. Various space probes were hastily launched to meet the advancing anomaly. There was even an extraordinary crash program to send an astronaut team to orbit the Moon, now seen as the last line of defense between Earth and sky.

Kate knew that the government had to be seen to be doing something; that was what governments were there for.

But she knew that it was all futile, and, in its own way, damaging. Though reassuring talking heads from the president on down tried to tell people to keep calm—and, more importantly, to keep showing up at work—there was growing disruption caused by the preparations themselves, if not by the strange lights in the sky, still invisible to the naked eye.

Of course, it all got worse when Cornelius's countdown timetable became widely known.

She did a little digging into the history of Cornelius Taine.

He had been an academic mathematician. She hadn't even recognized the terms his peers used to describe Cornelius's achievements—evidently they covered games of strategy, economic analysis, computer architecture, the shape of the universe, the distribution of prime numbers—anyhow he had been on his way, it seemed, to becoming one of the most influential minds of his generation.

But his gift seemed non-rational: he would leap to a new vision, somehow knowing its rightness instinctively, and construct laborious proofs later. Cornelius had remained solitary: he attracted awe, envy, resentment.

As he approached thirty, he drove himself through a couple of years of feverish brilliance. Maybe this was because the well of mathematical genius traditionally dries up at around that age. Or maybe there was a darker explanation. It wasn't unknown for creativity to derive from a depressive or schizoid personality. And creative capacities could be used in a defensive way, to fend off mental illness.

Maybe Cornelius was working hard in order to stay sane. If he was, it didn't seem to have worked.

The anecdotes of Cornelius's breakdown were fragmentary. On his last day at Princeton, they found him in the canteen, slamming his head against a wall, over and over.

After that, Cornelius had disappeared for two years. Kate's data miners had been unable to trace how he'd spent that time. When he reemerged, it was to become a founding board member of a consultancy called Eschatology, Inc.

She took this to Malenfant. "Don't you get it? Here's a guy who sees patterns in the universe nobody else can make out—a guy who went through a breakdown, driven crazy by the numbers in his head—a guy who now believes he can predict the end of humanity. If he came up to you in the street, what would you think of what he was muttering?"

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"I hear what you're saying," he said. "But—"

"But what?"

"*What if it's true*? Whether Cornelius is insane or not, what if he's *right?* What then?" His eyes were alive, excited.

"He's gone to ground, you know," she said.

"We have to find him."

It took two more precious days.

They tracked Cornelius to New York. He agreed to meet them at the head offices of Eschatology, Inc.

Kate wasn't sure what she had expected. Maybe a trailer home in Nevada, the walls coated with tabloid newspaper clippings, the interior crammed with cameras and listening gear.

But this office, here in the heart of Manhattan, was none of that.

Malenfant was glaring at Cornelius. "You know, I have the feeling that you've played me for a patsy through this whole damn thing. You've always known more than me, been one step ahead, used me to front your projects without telling me the full logic—"

Cornelius laughed at him, with a chilling arrogance. He barely sees us as human beings at all, Kate realized. He said, "Sore pride, Malenfant? Is that really what's most important to you? We really are just frightened chimpanzees, bewildered by the lights in the sky—"

"You arrogant asshole."

Kate looked around the small, oak-paneled conference room. The three of them sat at a polished table big enough for twelve, with small inlaid softscreens. There was a smell of polished leather and clean carpets: impeccable taste, corporate lushness, anonymity. The only real sign of unusual wealth and power, in fact, was the enviable view—from a sealed, tinted window—of Central Park. She saw people strolling, children playing on the glowing green grass, the floating sparks of police drones everywhere.

The essential ordinariness made it all the more scary, of course—today being a day when, she had learned, Mars had gone, vanishing into a blurring wave of alternate possibilities, volcanoes and water-carved canyons and life traces and all.

Kate said, "Malenfant's essentially right, isn't he? On some level, you anticipated all this."

"How can you know that?"

"I saw you smile. At JPL."

Cornelius nodded. "You see? Simple observation, Malenfant. This girl really is brighter than you are."

"Get to the point, Cornelius."

Cornelius sighed, a touch theatrically. "You know, the facts are there, staring everybody in the face. The *logic* is there. It's just that most people are unwilling to think it through.

"Take seriously for one minute the possibility that we are living in a planetarium, some kind of virtual-reality projection. What must it cost our invisible controllers to run? We are an inquisitive species, Malenfant. At any moment, we are liable to test anything and everything to

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destruction. To maintain their illusion, the controllers would surely require that their simulation of every object should be *perfect*—that is, undistinguishable from the real thing by any conceivable physical test."

"No copy is perfect," Malenfant said briskly. "Quantum physics. Uncertainty. All that stuff."

"In fact, your intuition is wrong," Cornelius said. "Quantum considerations actually show that a perfect simulation *is* possible—but it is energy-hungry.

"You see, there is a limit to the amount of information that may be contained within a given volume. This limit is called the Bekenstein Bound." Equations scrolled across the table surface before Kate; she let them glide past her eyes. "The Bound is essentially a manifestation of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, a reflection of the fundamental 'graininess' of our reality. Because of the existence of the Bound, every physical object is a finite-state machine—that is, it only requires a finite number of bits to replicate its every possible condition. Therefore, a *perfect* simulation of any physical object can be made—perfect, meaning undistinguishable from the real thing by any conceivable physical test."

Kate said uneasily, "Anything can be replicated?"

Cornelius smiled. "Including you, Kate. But perfect simulations are expensive. The bigger they are, the more energy they burn. And *that* is the chink in the controllers' armor."

"It is?"

"As human civilization has progressed, successively larger portions of reality have come within our reach. And the extent of the universe that must be simulated to high quality likewise increases: the walls around reality must be drawn successively back. Before 1969, for example, a crude mock-up of the Moon satisfying only a remote visual inspection might have sufficed; but since 1969, we can be sure that the painted Moon had to be replaced with a rocky equivalent. You see?" He winked at Kate. "A conspiracy theorist might point to the very different quality of the Moon's far side to its Earth-visible near side—mocked up in a hurry, perhaps?"

"Oh, bullshit, Cornelius," Malenfant said tiredly.

Kate said, "You actually have numbers for all this?"

Malenfant grunted. "Numbers, yeah. The mathematics of paranoia."

Cornelius, unperturbed, tapped at his desktop surface, and a succession of images, maps with overlays and graphs, flickered over its surface. "We can estimate the resources required to run a perfect planetarium of any given size. It's just a question of quantum mechanics and thermodynamics." He flicked a smile. "Graduate physics. Two equations.

"Look here. For much of its pre-agricultural history, humanity consisted of small roaming bands with little knowledge, save for tentative trading links, beyond a disc on the Earth's surface with a radius of a few kilometers. To generate planetariums on such a scale would require no more than a few percent of the energy available to a planetary-scale civilization: *we* could probably do it.

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"But by the time you have to fool a cohesive culture covering a hundred kilometers—that's a lot smaller than the Roman Empire, say—the capabilities of that planetary level civilization would be exceeded.

"The bigger the planetarium, the harder it gets. We can characterize our modern globe-spanning civilization by the radius of Earth and a depth corresponding to our deepest mines. To generate a planetarium on such a scale would exceed even the capability of a civilization able to master the energy output of a single star.

"A future human culture capable of direct exploration of the center of the Earth, and able to reach comets twice as far away as Pluto, would exhaust the resources of a galaxy.

"And if we reach the stars, we would test the resources of any conceivable planetarium. . . ."

Kate was bewildered by the escalation of number and concept. "We would?"

"Imagine a human colonization disc with a radius of a hundred light years, embedded in the greater disc of the Galaxy. To simulate every scrap of mass in there would exceed in energy requirements the resources of the entire visible universe. So after that point, any simulation must be less than perfect—and its existence prone to our detection. The lies must end, sooner or later. But, of course, we might not have to wait that long."

"Wait for what?"

"To crash the computer." He grinned coldly; on some level, she saw, this was all a game to him, the whole universe as an intellectual puzzle. "Perhaps we can overstretch their capacity to assemble increasing resources. Rushing the fence might be the way: we could send human explorers out to far distances in all directions as rapidly as possible, pushing back the walls around an expanding shell of space. But advanced robot spacecraft, equipped with powerful sensors, might achieve the same result. . . ."

"Ah," said Kate. "Or maybe even active but ground-based measures. Like laser echoing. And *that's* why you pushed Project Michelangelo."

Malenfant leaned forward. "Cornelius—*what have you done?*"

Cornelius bowed his head. "By the logic of Fermi, I was led to the conclusion that our universe is, in whole or in part, a thing of painted walls and duck blinds. I wanted to challenge those who hide from us. The laser pulse to Centauri—a sudden scale expansion by a factor of thousands—was the most dramatic way I could think of to drive the controllers' processing costs through the roof. And it must have caught them by surprise—our technology is barely able enough to handle such a feat—those critics were right, Malenfant, when they criticized the project for being premature. But they did not see my true purpose."

Kate said slowly, "I can't believe your arrogance. What gave you the *right*—"

"To bring the sky crashing down?" His nostrils flared. "What gave *them* the right to put us in a playpen in the first place? If we are being contained and deceived, we are in a relationship of unequals. If our controllers exist, let them show themselves and justify their actions. *That* was my purpose—to force them out into the *open.* And imagine what we

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might see! *The fire-folk sitting in the air! / The bright boroughs, the circle-citadels there!* . . . Do you know Gerald Manley Hopkins?"

Malenfant shook his head. "You were right, Kate. The guy is crazy."

Cornelius studied them both. "On to practical matters. When the anomalies are visible to all, disorder among the foolish herds will follow. Soon the flights will be grounded, the freeways jammed. If you wish to leave—"

Malenfant touched Kate's hand. "Where is home for you?"

She shrugged. "I have an apartment in LA. I don't even know where my parents are. Either of them"

"It's not a time to be alone. Go be with your mom."

"No." She was shuddering. Her involvement in all this had long passed that of a journalist attached to a story; now she was just another human being, staring bewildered at the approaching hurricane—but here she was at the eye of the storm, and something about Malenfant's strength reassured her. "Let me stay. Please."

He nodded brusquely, avoiding her eyes. "Cornelius, if you have nowhere else to go—"

Kate said, "How long?"

Cornelius shrugged. "The math is chancy. Twenty-four hours at best."

It feels like half the population of the human race has downloaded.

"Into what?"

Into anything they can find. Some folk are trying to create self-sentient copies of themselves, existing entirely within the data nets. The ultimate bunker, right?

"I thought that was illegal."

So what do you think the data cops are going to do about it today?

"Anyhow it's futile. A copy wouldn't be *you.*"

You tell me. There are philosophical principles about the identity of indiscernibles: if a copy really is identical right down to the quantum level, then it has to be *the original. . . . Something like that. Anyhow I doubt it's going to be achieved in the time left.*

"I'm surprised we aren't running out of capacity."

There have been a few crashes. But as ends of the world go, this is an odd one, Kate. Even now it's still just a bunch of funny lights in the sky. The sun is shining, the water supply is flowing, the power is on.

And, you know, in a way it's an exciting time; inside here, anyhow. There's a kind of huge technological explosion, more innovation in the last few hours than in a decade.

"I think I should go now. I have people I'm meant to be with, physically I mean—"

Damn right you should go.

"What?"

More room for me, sister.

She felt affronted. "What use is huddling here? This isn't a nuclear war. It's not even an asteroid strike. Rodent, there might be *nothing left*—no processors to maintain your electronic nirvana."

So I'll take my chance. And anyhow there's the possibility of accelerated perception: you know, four subjective hours in the tank for one spent out-

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side. There are rumors the Chinese have got a way to drive that ratio up to infinity—making this final day last forever—hackers are swarming like locusts over the Chinese sites. And that's where I'm headed. Get out of here. There won't be room for everybody.

"Rodent—"

Wake up, wake up.

Kate, with Malenfant and Cornelius, stood on Mike's porch. Inside the house, the baby was crying.

And in the murky Houston sky, new Moons and Earths burst like silent fireworks, glowing blue or red or yellow, each lit by the light of its own out-of-view sun.

There were small Earths, wizened worlds that reminded her of Mars, with huge continents of glowering red rock. But some of them were huge, monster planets drowned in oceans that stretched from pole to pole. The Moons were different too.

The smallest were just bare grey rock like Luna, but the largest were almost Earth-like, showing thick air and ice and the glint of ocean. There were even Earths with pairs of Moons, Kate saw, or triplets. One ice-bound Earth was surrounded, not by a Moon, but by a glowing ring system, like Saturn's.

Kate found it hard not to flinch; it was like being under a hail of gaudy cannonballs, as the alternate planets flickered in and out of existence in eerie, precise silence.

It was just seven days since the failed echo from Centauri.

"I wonder what's become of our astronauts," Malenfant growled. "Poor bastards."

"A great primordial collision shaped Earth and Moon," Cornelius murmured. "Everything about Earth and Moon—their axial tilt, composition, atmosphere, length of day, even Earth's orbit around the sun—was determined by the impact. But it might have turned out differently. Small, chance changes in the geometry of the collision would have made a large difference in the outcome. Lots of possible realities, budding off from that key, apocalyptic moment. . . ."

Malenfant said, "So what are we looking at? Computer simulations from the great planetarium?"

"Or windows into other possible realities." Cornelius seemed coldly excited.

Malenfant said, "Is this what we were being protected *from*? This—disorderliness?"

"Maybe. As we evolved to awareness we found ourselves in a clean, logical universe, a puzzle box that might have been designed to help us figure out the underlying laws of nature, and so develop our intelligence. But it was always a mystery why the universe should be comprehensible to our small brains at all. Maybe we now know why: *the whole thing was a fake*, a training ground for our infant species. Now we have crashed the simulator."

"But," said Kate, "we aren't yet ready for the real thing."

"Evidently not. Perhaps we should have trusted the controllers. They

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must be technologically superior. Perhaps we should assume they are morally superior also."

"A little late to think of that now," Malenfant said bitterly.

No traffic moved on the street. Everybody had gone home, or anyhow found a place to hunker down, until—

Well, until what, Kate? As she had followed this gruesome step-by-step process from the beginning, she had studiously avoided thinking about its eventual outcome: when the wave of unreality, or whatever the hell it was, came washing at last over Earth, over *her.* It was unimaginable—even more so than her own death. At least after her death, she wouldn't know about it; would even that be true after *this*?

Now there were firebursts in the sky. Human fire.

"Nukes," Malenfant said softly. "We're fighting back, by God. Well, what else is there to do but try? God bless America."

Saranne snapped, "Come back in and close the damn door."

The three of them filed meekly inside. Saranne, clutching her baby, stalked around the house's big living room, pulling curtains, as if that would shut it all out. But Kate didn't blame her; it was an understandable human impulse.

Malenfant threw a light switch. It didn't work.

Mike came in from the kitchen. "No water, no power." He shrugged. "I guess that's it." He moved around the room, setting candles on tables and the fire hearth; their glow was oddly comforting. The living room was littered with pails of water, cans of food. It was as if they were laying up for a snowstorm, Kate thought.

Malenfant said, "What about the softscreens?"

Mike said, "Last time I looked, all there was to see was a loop of the president's last message. The one about playing with your children, not letting them be afraid. Try again if you want."

Nobody had the heart.

The light that flickered around the edges of the curtains seemed to be growing more gaudy.

"Kind of quiet," Mike said. "Without the traffic noise—"

The ground shuddered, like a quake, like a carpet being yanked from under them.

Saranne clutched her baby, laden with its useless immortality, and turned on Cornelius. "All this from your damn fool stunt! Why couldn't you leave well enough alone? We were fine as we were, without all *this.* You had no right—no right. . . ."

"Hush." Malenfant moved quickly to her, and put an arm around her shuddering shoulders.

"It's okay, honey." He drew her to the center of the room and sat with her and the infant on the carpet. He beckoned to the others. "We should hold onto each other."

Mike seized on this eagerly. "Yes. Maybe what you touch stays real—you think?"

They sat in a loose ring. Kate found herself between Malenfant and Saranne. Saranne's hand was moist, Malenfant's as dry as a bone: that astronaut training, she supposed.

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"Seven days," Malenfant said. "Seven days to unmake the world. Kind of Biblical."

"A pleasing symmetry," Cornelius said. His voice cracked.

The candles blew out, all at once. The light beyond the curtains was growing brighter, shifting quickly, slithering like oil.

The baby stopped crying.

Kate felt a deep, sharp stab of regret. Not just for herself, but for mankind. She couldn't believe that this was the end of humanity: you wouldn't exterminate the occupants of a zoo for poking a hole in the fence. But this was surely the end of the world she had known. The play was over, the actors removing their make-up, the stage set collapsing—and human history was ending.

I guess we'll never know how we would have turned out, she thought.

Now the peculiar daylight shone *through* the fabric of the walls, as if they were wearing thin.

"Oh, shit," Mike said. He reached for Saranne.

Cornelius folded over on himself, rocking, thumb in mouth.

Malenfant said, "What's wrong? Isn't this what you wanted. . . ?"

The wall dissolved. Pale, disorderly light spilled over them.

Kate watched the baby's face. His new eyes huge, Michael seemed to be smiling. ❍

ADVICE TO ALIEN LIFE FORMS

Intelligence? It constitutes
but one of *many* attributes;
So note—and this is NOT malicious—
's better not to be delicious!

—W. Gregory Stewart

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SHELTERING

Tom Purdom

After a decade in which the author stayed mostly in our solar system, Tom Purdom has decided to start writing interstellar stories. "The Path of the Transgressor" from our June 2003 issue was the first product of this new resolution. Mr. Purdom still has some ideas for stories set closer to home, however, and the following tale is one of them. Of this story he writes, "I have just marked my sixty-seventh birthday and take some pleasure in a couple of lines from Tennyson's 'Ulysses' — 'Old age hath yet its honor and its toil . . . some work of noble note may yet be done, not unbecoming men that strove with gods.' "

Pearson's first war toy had been a bombsight. He had been five years old and his mother had helped him order it from the back of a cereal box, a couple of months after the attack on Pearl Harbor. The bombsight had been a small block of black wood with a glass crosshair arrangement. The targets had been four paper ships. You lined up the crosshairs on one of the ships and turned a red wheel on the bottom of the block of wood. And watched the bombs fall through the stratospheric heights that separated a boy's eye from the floor.

The game on Pearson's notescreen is a bit more sophisticated. It's based on the invasion of Normandy—a battle that took place over eight decades ago. Pearson has played several games that attempt to replicate the tactical challenges of the Normandy campaign, and this one has become his favorite. He especially likes the way the game designer dealt with the logistics. The shelter is a noisy place, but the game has blocked out the wails of two infants and the relentless chatter on the TV.

Forty-three adults have crammed themselves into the shelter. Most of them are sitting in orange plastic chairs arranged in front of the TV screen. Four toddlers are stumbling around the play area next to the snack bar. Several mothers are holding babies. The shelter has attracted most of the parents who live in the apartments clustered around the

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Henry Creek shopping mall. Most of the childless people have weighed the odds and stayed in their apartments.

Pearson has two divisions bogged down on Omaha Beach two days after D-Day. He's faced with the same decision Omar Bradley struggled with on D-Day itself. Should he give up and withdraw from Omaha Beach? If he lets the Germans have Omaha and allocates the extra supplies and reinforcements to the other invasion beaches . . .

A child yells on Pearson's left. Two boys are fighting a gun duel in the rear of the shelter. One of the boys is hopping up and down blazing away with the forefingers of both hands. The other boy has turned three chairs on their sides and created a barricade. The spaces between the chairs give the boy two well-placed fields of fire. The two-gun kid outside the barricade would have absorbed five carefully aimed shots in the last thirty seconds.

A bearded young man strides toward the gunfight. He is exceptionally tall by Pearson's standards—at least six three—and he has a torso that has been shaped by an aerobics and body building program that probably started when he was three years old. His wife is just as athletic. They live on Pearson's floor, two doors down the hall. The boy behind the barricade is their son.

The father crouches in front of the barricade and murmurs a lengthy speech. His hands pull the chairs apart. He squeezes the boy's shoulder and stands up. He sees Pearson watching him and immediately looks away.

The boy sets the two chairs upright. He gives his playmate the kind of resigned, sad-eyed look children resort to when they hope their friends will understand they have to submit to the irresistible fate called parents.

Pearson can guess what the father has said. Pearson likes to sit in the atrium of the apartment building in the later afternoon. Two months ago, before the war started, the boy and his father looked over Pearson's shoulder when Pearson was playing with the 1812 module of his *Fine Art of Naval Warfare* suite.

"Let's go play on the swings," the father said. In a tone of voice that made it very clear the boy was receiving a mandatory suggestion.

A flare of emotional noises attracts Pearson's attention to the TV screen. A redheaded woman is yammering next to a map of the Boston-to-Washington corridor. The red zone in western Maryland has acquired a stubby arm that is pointed directly at Washington. The map disappears and the camera hops through real-time images of houses that have crumbled under the onslaught of the latest advance in military microbiology.

Pearson's father had been a submariner. He left the house sometime after Pearl Harbor and Pearson didn't see him again until the fall of 1945. In 1946, when Pearson's family was living in naval officers housing in San Diego, Pearson's father crossed the living room with a chess board and a box of chess pieces clutched in his hands.

"You'll like this game, Teddy," his father said. "It's just like fighting a battle."

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* * *

Pearson is sitting in one of the armchairs the shelter management has grouped around a table. On his right, just a few steps away, four men have drifted into a heated masculine discussion. Pearson has been picking up snatches as he maneuvers the symbols on his screen.

"We should have known we were in trouble as soon as we learned they'd set up the first lab. . . ."

"You can't reason with them. That's all there is to it. You have to understand that certain kinds of people can't be reasoned with. . . ."

"We always wait until somebody's backed us into a corner. . . ."

Pearson has been listening to people argue about war since he was a teenager during the Korean War. They always say the same things. He could hand them cards with their dialogue all written out in advance.

The tough guys always want to fight an all out-war, complete with mass armies and nuclear weapons. The soft guys always want to try "alternative approaches" like economic sanctions or something they call "diplomacy." The weepy guys want you to know they understand it's all terrible and tragic. The wiseguys know—absolutely *know*—there's a strategy that would have settled it permanently, forever, one hundred percent the way we wanted it settled, if those morons in Washington had just been smart enough to think of it.

People fight wars. Pearson is ninety-one years old, and the United States has engaged in seven wars in his lifetime—over fifteen, actually, if you count the more prominent "operations" and "incidents." And what would the total look like if you included all the years of the little four-decade episode called the Cold War? And all the technological maneuvering that went into the thermonuclear arms race?

People fight wars. That's all you can say. Everything else is nervous chatter.

A small hand rests on the arm of Pearson's chair. The boy from down the hall is standing beside him. He is staring at the silhouettes of tanks and soldiers that represent the divisions deployed across Normandy.

Pearson glances around the room. The boy's father has returned to his chair in the first row in front of the TV screen. The boy's mother is sitting on the other side of the room with a pair of earphones on her head. Her eyes look hooded. She is observing her son, but she is obviously concentrating on the music flowing across her brain.

Pearson thinks about the games stored in his notescreen. His fingers slide across the screen. A tan section of desert replaces the stylized map of Normandy. Two battalions of tanks and artillery face each other across the sand.

Pearson touches three of the artillery pieces with his forefinger and jabs at the enemy targets he wants to attack. The three artillery pieces erupt into action. The enemy fires back. Tanks begin to move. The boy leans toward the screen.

For Pearson, chess had been a wargame. The pawns had been infantrymen who slashed their way across the board with their spears. The rooks had been lumbering heavy cavalry who could charge across the entire

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length of the battlefield. He read books on chess and tried to apply strategic principles like control of the center.

Chess wasn't a real wargame, of course. It was a game of logic and calculation that had been inspired by the battles of ancient Persia. In real war, you didn't race down the field and automatically rout the unit in front of you. In real war, you encountered unpredictable factors like morale and leadership. In real wargames, attacks could fail—you determined the results of the attack with a roll of the dice or a random number generated by a computer, with odds that had been set up so there was some possibility the weaker force might stand its ground and repel a stronger attacker.

Pearson hadn't played real wargames until he had reached his thirties. He had started partly because he had a son who was just the right age—a live-in playmate, Pearson had joked. He had built up a big collection of eighteenth-century model soldiers, and he and his son had played elaborate games, with realistic rules, on the basement ping-pong table. Later—after his son had gone off to college—Pearson had started playing computer wargames.

Pearson's true boyhood wargame had been a form of hide-and-go-seek that he and his buddies had played with their toy guns. In those days, residential neighborhoods had still contained undeveloped lots. One group would hide in the brambles and bushes of a vacant lot and try to ambush the other group when it came looking for them.

Pearson can still remember the day he discovered the virtues of fire and maneuver. The ambushers normally picked one hiding place and stayed in it. One afternoon, Pearson crawled away from his first hiding place after he fired his first shot. And wiped out two more guys when he suddenly popped up twenty feet from the spot where they had expected to see him. It was one of the more satisfying moments of his life.

The boy points to three enemy tanks the computer is slipping around a hill on the left flank. "Now that presents a problem," Pearson murmurs. "I can move these three guns in front of them. But artillery pieces can't fire on the move. And they aren't armored. They'll be in range of the guns on the tanks before they can fire their first shot. Suppose we move these two tanks over instead? And let the three guns keep firing at the main force? What do you think? The two tanks will be outnumbered. But I think we have to make the sacrifice."

The boy frowns. His eyes roam across the screen. He nods assent and Pearson touches each of the tanks and traces the path he wants them to follow.

Pearson touches the enemy tanks as soon as his own vehicles come in range. Guns fire on both sides. An enemy tank explodes. The boy smiles.

Pearson realizes someone is standing in front of his chair. He raises his head and sees the boy's father glaring down at him.

The father turns his head. The boy's mother is hurrying toward them. She is leaning sideways as she holds onto a big bag she has perched on her hip.

"Let him play," the mother says. "Give the kid a break."

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The father's jaw tightens. "It's a war game. Tanks. Guns."

Pearson looks at the mother. *I was five when they bombed Pearl Harbor. Nine when we all ran out in the streets and celebrated the end. I shot it out with my friends. I built model ships and model planes. Superman and the Blackhawks took on the bad guys in the comic books. John Wayne and Gary Cooper clobbered them on the movie screens. The boys in second grade drew crayon pictures of planes dropping bombs and the teacher hung them on the wall, beside the pictures of cows and houses. It got us through the war. It turned the war into something a kid could live with.*

Pearson has made that speech before. This isn't the first time someone has made negative remarks about his recreational activities. This time, his reply stays inside his skull. Pearson was married for fifty-one years. He thinks he understands the dynamics of the situation.

The father stares at his wife. He is caught in a dilemma, in Pearson's opinion. He is a moral, thoroughly modern male and he is therefore supposed to oppose violence and participate in the great campaign to eliminate it from human affairs. But he is also supposed to respect the opinions of women.

The father is preoccupied with morality. The mother is thinking about her child's feelings.

"Jane. . . ."

"What difference does it make? Do you think the war is going to last five minutes longer just because your son played a *game?* Do you think he'd be better off watching the stuff they're showing on the TV?"

"We've got twelve thousand people sitting in underground bunkers manipulating robots," the father says. "I'll bet 90 percent of them still think it's all just a *game*."

But he turns away. He stalks toward his seat in front of the TV screen.

The mother pats her son on the head. Pearson watches her return to her chair. He wonders if she and her husband realize that they haven't said a word to him. Have they noticed he didn't say anything to *them?*

There are times when you have to act and times when you have to let things happen. Good strategists know that.

In May of 1942, as part of their preparations for the battle of Midway, the Japanese conducted a wargame on the bridge of their flagship. At one point in the game, American dive bombers attacked the main Japanese carrier force. A dice role decreed that nine American bombs had struck two of the Japanese carriers and the carriers had been sunk. The referee arbitrarily over-ruled the dice and the two carriers were returned to the wargame table.

One month later, at 10:25 A.M. on the fourth of June, American dive bombers attacked the Japanese fleet while the four Japanese carriers were rearming and refueling their planes. The decks were littered with fuel and ammunition. Ten American bombs hit three of the carriers. The bombs set off fires and secondary explosions, the damage control teams couldn't contain the inferno, and the three carriers eventually slid beneath the sea. The Japanese advance in the Pacific came to an end and the Japanese spent the rest of the war on the defensive.

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In the decades before the Second World War, American naval strategists developed a plan for a war with Japan. They called it Plan Orange and they refined it by playing a long series of wargames at the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island. After the war, Admiral Nimitz noted that almost nothing that happened in the real war had surprised him. Almost everything that could happen had turned up during one of the wargames. The biggest exception had been the kamikaze suicide planes. None of the American game players had thought of that.

Pearson was only a child when Admiral Nimitz was deploying his forces across the Pacific, but he is familiar with both anecdotes. Like many wargamers, he collects stories that reflect the quirky, sometimes ironic, relationship between wargames and the real-life mayhem they try to simulate. He can tell you about the battalions of toy soldiers that campaigned across Winston Churchill's childhood bedroom. He has skimmed the pages of *Little Wars,* the book on toy soldier wargaming that H.G. Wells published in 1913. He knows that the Jane's military reference books owe their existence to a British hobbyist, Fred Jane, who accumulated information on warships so he could play realistic naval wargames.

As a boy, during World War II, Pearson thumbed through the pocket editions of *Jane's Fighting Ships* he encountered in bookstores. He wondered who Jane was. And why she was interested in warships.

"We've got a problem," Pearson says. "See where they're putting guns on that hill? They'll have a field of fire that covers half the battlefield."

Pearson's fingers are already hopping across the game screen. His forces change course and scurry toward safe zones behind hills and rises. He'd frozen the game during the altercation with the boy's parents, but the computer still gained a twenty-second advantage before he activated the stall command. The enemy guns open fire while some of his units are still exposed. Two of his tanks disappear. The boy leans toward the screen. He points to a hill and Pearson nods with approval. The hill is just as strategic as the hill the computer has seized.

"That's very good," Pearson says. "I didn't see that."

He jabs at two of his guns and starts them racing toward the new position. The boy watches intently.

"Keep it up," Pearson says. "You've got a real feel for terrain."

He raises his eyes from the screen. The boy's mother is staring at the rear wall as she listens to the sounds in her earphones. The boy's father is watching a uniformed woman on the TV. Pictures of decomposing apartment towers replace the woman, and the father shakes his head.

Pearson's desert warfare game can be set at different levels of difficulty, like most computer games. Pearson selected the easy beginner's level when he put it on the screen. He hasn't mentioned that to the boy, of course.

"There's no way we can lose this game," Pearson tells the boy. "Not with a guy like you on my side."

Pearson can't remember when he learned that reality doesn't have a button that sets it on an easy level. Someday the boy will learn that too. But not now. Not right now. ○

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THE MOUTH OF HELL

Tim Sullivan

Tim Sullivan is both the author of seven novels and more than thirty short stories and novelettes and the editor of two anthologies. He has written feature films, the most recent of which, *Demonicus,* was released by Full Moon Entertainment in 2002. Mr. Sullivan intends to finish a historical novel, *Kolossos,* later this year.

I: A Journey to the West

In the final year of Flavius Claudius Julianus' reign, I traveled to Rome for the first time. My father's death, and my consequent inheritance of his monies and property, made it possible for me to go. As I planned my trip, I could not know that the strange events awaiting me in Rome would forever affect my life.

I, Gaius Carnuleian Gessius, was born in the east. Father had been a young aedile sent down to Antioch from Constantinople to advise on tax matters. There he met Mother, a Syrian girl of good family. When I was six, Father's service in the provinces terminated. Mother and I journeyed with him for the first time to Constantinople. Unfortunately, the air of Mother's new home did not agree with her, and she perished of a lung ailment at thirty-four. I clearly remember the sadness in her dark eyes as she lay dying. Indeed, the wound of her death yet festers in my heart.

Father lived on for two more decades, and passed in his sleep at fifty-seven years, his lifelong dream of becoming a consul left unrealized. He did manage to attain the rank of quaestor, after serving in the senate for a decade, and was under consideration for praetor—the final step in the *cursus honorium* before consulship—when he fell ill for the last time. Thus he considered himself a failure, a condition of mind and spirit which doubtless hastened his demise.

Throughout my youth, Father had frequently told me that I must visit Rome, birthplace of the Empire. He reiterated this in his final days; I was eager to honor his wish. And so, a few months after his death, I sailed west.

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On the way to Italy, the ship's *hortator* maintained a steady drum beat for the oarsmen. We hugged the coastline through fog, rain, moonlight, and sunshine. It was the longest sea voyage I had yet undertaken.

My initial impression of Rome was not good. A brief comparison of the eastern and western capitals in those days may be instructive. Many wonders, on a scale of which my childish mind could barely conceive, widened my eyes upon our arrival in Constantinople a quarter century ago. Ancient Byzantium was by this time barely perceptible behind the newer, western trappings my Roman kinsmen had erected (and continue to erect) everywhere in the city and its environs. Temples, aqueducts, *cloaca,* baths; all manner of public works had been engineered during the ongoing cultural transformation. Countless statues of famous men were being put up, too, but sculptures of the gods were forbidden.

A mere three decades had passed since Constantine the Great founded his namesake Christian capitol, strategically located between the Black Sea and Rome's traditional enemy, Parthia. Commerce in the new metropolis thrived, negotiated energetically and loudly in scores of languages. Colorfully clad Asian and African merchants haggled endlessly with Roman citizens over bolts of silk, woodwork, or foodstuffs. The stink of garbage and camel dung mingled with the vendors' delicious cooking smells, as we made our way through the milling *agora* toward our comfortable new home.

No such vigor was evident the day I first entered Rome. Just before dawn, my galley docked at the proximate port of Ostia. From there, I made my way to the thousand-year-old capital, hiring a cart to carry my considerable baggage, my two client slaves, and myself. Reaching my apartments on the Via Vipsania—arranged for me to live in while in Rome by the Byzantine travel office—turned out to be an all-day affair. I was weary by the time we arrived at sunset, so perhaps my lethargy accounts for my disappointment.

Rome was a busy place that evening, but not forceful in the same sense that Constantinople was. Admittedly, I had first seen Constantinople as a child, and perhaps my perception of the city's dynamism was thus colored by my imagination. But this I doubt. Rome was, if not precisely moribund by this time, certainly a good deal less vital than in centuries past, when the Empire was at its zenith and the gods smiled down upon her . . . though the Christians would surely argue that point.

In the event, I was exhausted upon entering my new rooms on the second floor of the *insula*, where I laid on the floor without so much as a cushion to comfort me, and instantly fell asleep.

I awoke at dawn, stretched my stiffened joints and dressed myself. Leaving my trustworthy *clientela* Leander and Xantippe—an elderly Corinthian couple who had been with our family since Father was a boy—in charge of my apartments, I went out.

The nearest public bath was just a short walk from my new home. There I thoroughly cleansed my body, and purchased sausages and cheese at a nearby *taberna.* After breakfast, I set about the fabled Seven Hills to visit the monuments of Rome, like any tourist. My exhaustive sightseeing went on for days: the Capitoline Temple of Jupiter, the Cam-

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pus Martius, Titus' triumphal arch at the Via Sacra's summit, the Pantheon, the Palatine, the Curia, the Flavian Amphitheatre, and finally, the great Circus.

The Circus Maximus I found to be a rambling and stately, if unsafe, structure. Only the marble *oppidum,* where dignitaries preside over the races, appeared to be sturdy. Termite-infested, rotting wooden stands formed an oblong around the marble *spina* and dirt track. These tiers seemed likely to collapse of their own weight, if they didn't burn to the ground first.

Nevertheless, I was transported, sitting among the Circus' serried ranks in almost delirious anticipation of the Red, Blue, White, and Green drivers lashing their steeds into a lather. (I favored the Greens at home, but cared little who won in Rome, so long as I could see some good races.) As a fanfare announced the ceremonial march, my thoughts drifted.

The day before, I had spent a few hours at the Flavian Amphitheatre (called the Colosseum by plebeians) and seen much blood spilled. Most of those slaughtered were convicted felons and domestic animals. No gladiators and few wild beasts died. These were too expensive to kill in large numbers, of course, and so they performed sparely, while the condemned were slain with abandon. The stench of blood and feces was appalling.

Many of the doomed had been arrested on trumped-up charges, and were actually executed for the "sin" of heresy. The Christian mob cheered on and on until I was stricken with headache. Let them murder one another over their hairsplitting superstitions, I thought; at least they are not yet persecuting traditionalists such as myself. The races, with their genuine competition, would surely be far more exciting than that bloodbath.

Enthusiasm for the Colors was notoriously more fervid here than at the shining new Hippodrome in Constantinople. Indeed, several fights broke out even before the races began, and had to be stopped by *vigiles.* Perhaps the races, rank as they were with the odor of sweat and horse manure, served as a stimulus, reminding the Roman populace that they were still alive—much as bloodletting here on Earth was said to reanimate the dead in Hades. But as soon as the citizens stepped out of the Circus, their staid attitude once again overtook them. Could it have been the prevalence of Christian dogma and its obsession with death that so oppressed their spirits?

I am not a follower of the Christ, as you have surely gathered. My household god is Consus, ruler of the underworld. Father taught me that our ancestry dates back to the ancient Etruscans, whose chief deity Consus was, and that our family has always kept faith with him. Coincidentally, there is a subterranean sanctuary dedicated to our *lares familiarum* at the great Circus, opposite the shrine to the goddess Murcia.

Consus is not the same deity as Pluto, no matter what you may have heard, nor did he mate with Persephone. Those two demonic lovers jealously guarded the imprisoned souls in their grim domain. With few exceptions (such as Odysseus' dialogues with the slain Achaean heroes) the condemned remained in Hell under the watchful eyes of Pluto and Persephone. Consus is apparently neither so observant nor so intolerant as

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they, occasionally permitting the dead to escape from the underworld and haunt the earth.

The great Circus was constructed in the Murcia Valley, pleasingly adhering to the contours of the land between the Palatine and Aventine hills. The rites of Consus have it that the track's stone foundation was built over a fissure leading to the next world—still regarded by traditionalists as the very Mouth of Hell. Blocked by this massive structure, the dead mostly stay where they belong, despite Consus' inattention. But from time to time, the spilling of blood summons them up through the earth. They mingle unobtrusively with the Circus mob—one hundred and fifty thousand overheated souls perched on rickety planks, far too involved in watching the races to take note of the departed seated among them.

When the horses are detached from their chariots at end of day and taken away for grooming, the weary spectators exit from the *cavea* in the gathering darkness. The resurrected walk with the living out into the streets, wandering through the city and even into the countryside, whence they assume a ghastly semblance of their corporeal selves. These apparitions have been recorded in such distant imperial outposts as Cappadocia, Narbonensis, Mauretania, and even the Byzantine capital itself (though the gods know we have enough ghosts in Constantinople as it is). Along the way, the perceptive among the living frequently sense the dead's presence as revenant, demon, or lamia. . . .

But the *pompa* concluded, the teams sprang forth noisily from the *carceres,* the mob cheered, and such musings retreated swiftly from my mind as the races commenced.

A "shipwreck" (as they call a chariot crash in Rome) on the far turn of the sixth lap was the high point of the first race. The Red team's chariot was smashed to splinters against the low wall below the spectators, at the southwestern end of the Circus. A thunderous roar of excitement rose up. The Red driver's four-horse team dragged him half the length of the *euripus* ditch before he was able to cut himself loose from the reins, using a blade he kept in a sheath fastened to his forearm. Thus he survived, but he did not appear to be a man who would ever drive again. A physician's slaves bore his broken body away on a stretcher.

The crowd was disappointed that he lived, but their bloodlust was sated in the second and third races. Two drivers were killed during a collision in the former, a White and a Green, and another Red in the latter, capsizing spectacularly. I exulted, for the blood of these brave men would soak into the dust and drip into the greedy Mouth of Hell.

The fourth race featured *bigae*—smaller, lighter chariots and two-horse teams less prone to shipwreck. During this race, my attention was diverted by the sight of a slender, graceful woman of about twenty-five years. Upswept auburn hair framed her delicate face, sun-tinted ringlets bobbing on either side of her patrician cheeks. A rather un-Roman, uptilted nose, and lips shaped like Eros' bow perfectly complemented her green eyes. I could not stop staring at her despite the furious action on the track and the bellowing of the spectators. She sat in front of me, a few paces to my right, in the company of a large, hirsute man.

Between the fourth and fifth races, her companion left her, perhaps to

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purchase refreshments. As the sand on the track was dampened with perfumed water to keep down the dust and the stench, I gathered my courage and rose to speak with her.

"Hello," I said, sitting in her companion's place. "It's very hot today, isn't it?"

She turned and looked at me, bemused. For a moment, I thought that she would tell me to leave her, but she said, "It is."

"I could not help but notice you, such a lovely woman among all these vulgar spectators."

"You flatter me." She smiled.

"No flattery can sufficiently extol the beauty I see before me. I speak only the truth."

She laughed merrily, and I grinned at her.

"You are from the east," she said. "I can tell by your accent."

"And you are observant as well as beauteous, for I have indeed recently arrived from Constantinople," said I, telling her my name.

"I am pleased to meet you, Gaius," she said. "My name is Honoria." She extended her hand. But before I could take her delicate fingers in my own, her companion returned, bearing a winesack and foodstuffs wrapped in a greasy cloth. Was he lover or servant? I could not be sure.

"I will leave you now," I said, "but only after begging your forgiveness for my intrusion."

"There is no need to apologize. I enjoyed our chat."

I bowed.

"Farewell, then," said Honoria.

"I cannot say farewell before I know where and when I shall see you again," I replied.

"Here, at the Circus." But she did not mention on what day she would return to the races.

I made my way back to my seat, Honoria's escort glowering at me as I feigned nonchalance. In truth, he was so big and powerful that he doubtless could have done me great harm. I hoped that this would be the last time I saw him.

II: Dinner with a Lady

As chance would have it, I encountered him before I spoke to Honoria again. I had attended the races frequently in the hope of seeing her, my disappointment increasing daily as she failed to turn up. I asked my few new acquaintances about her, but without knowing her surname no one could be certain of her *gens,* and so I learned nothing.

In Constantinople as well as in Rome, Xantippe constantly clucked at me to find a girl and marry, while Leander rolled his eyes at her suggestion. For the first time, I ignored his clownish warnings and dared believe that Honoria might be the woman I would wed. I thought of little else, for I was lonely.

But what of her outsize companion? And then one evening at an inn he

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suddenly stood before me, blocking my path. He seemed surprised and discomfited to see me.

"You!" he said.

"Sir," I replied. I took umbrage at his tone, and yet I was secretly happy that I had encountered him, thinking that he might somehow lead me to Honoria. "You stand in my way."

He struck me in the face before anything more could be said. I toppled noisily over a table and fell to my knees, knocking down a brazier. Fiery embers exploded before—and behind—my eyelids. I heard a woman scream, chair legs scraping the floor, men shouting. And then nothing. Was I dead?

It turned out that I was not, as you have surely deduced, else I could not have written this narrative. But I assure you that I did not feel very much alive when I awakened. My head ached, my elbows and knees were scraped raw, and clotted blood sealed my left eyelid, half-blinding me.

"Polyphemus." I recognized Honoria's voice before I saw her. She leaned over me with a wet sponge and worked gently at my head injury.

"I am not the Cyclops," I said weakly. "There is still a second eye under this dried blood." She dabbed at my wound until I could open both eyes and focus on her. I found her to be fully as fair as I remembered. Gradually, I came to realize that I lay naked in a warm bath. This was not how I had envisioned my second meeting with Honoria.

"Do I dream?" I asked.

She shushed me and poured hot water over my scalp from a small amphora, gently massaged my head, rubbed scented oil onto my back and worked it into my pores with a *strigil*. My joy was great despite my battered head, to be cared for by the woman who so infatuated me.

At last she held up a mirror so that I might examine the damage to my face. It did not look as nasty as it felt, now that the cut was cleansed. Honoria excused herself, but soon returned with a cup in her hand.

"Wine?" I asked, feeling too queasy to drink. "I cannot."

"It is a philtre," she said. "For the pain."

I wanted to tell her that I would gladly suffer far more pain than this to be with her, but I hurt so much that it was difficult even to make flirtatious comments. I gratefully gulped down the bubbling draught, and laid my shoulders and head against the marble rim of the bath.

"Torinius has been punished for assaulting you," she said.

"Torinius. . . ," I repeated. So that was the brute's name. "He must love you very much," I mumbled.

"He is loyal," she said. "That is why he brought you to me."

"Oh?"

"I instructed him to follow you."

"He is your slave?"

"Yes."

My blood quickened to hear that Torinius was not her lover. "And may I ask why the brute assaulted me?"

"He was told only to watch you in secrecy. But when you caught him out, he acted impulsively. He rendered you unconscious and carried you here, as he thought I would wish."

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"Why should you wish such a thing?"

"I am interested in you, Gaius."

"To what end?" My blood quickened yet again, but her answer disarmed me.

"I need a courageous man," she said.

I tried to laugh modestly. "Why do you see *me* as a lion, Honoria?"

"Because of your boldness in approaching me at the Circus."

"Surely you have encountered bold men before."

"Yes, but they were not strangers in Rome."

"Then it is my exoticism that appeals to you as well as my supposed courage?"

"In part. The fewer gossiping citizens who know you, the less likely that *delatores* are watching."

"Espionage is not required to further acquaint us."

"Ah, but it is. There are many moralists at large in Rome."

"As there are in the east."

"Such men are not to be trusted with secrets that I might tell."

Secrets? Our conversation grew more intriguing by the moment. "You fear that these secrets might lead me to brand you a heretic?"

"I cannot be a heretic, Gaius, for I am not a Christian. Still, greater ladies than myself have been proscribed and executed by fanatics in recent days."

"Greater in *gens,* perhaps, but none greater in beauty."

She smiled easily, accustomed to such compliments.

"Are *you* a Christian, Gaius?" she asked pointedly.

"No, I too am a worshipper of the old gods."

She nodded. "As I thought."

"Had you but inquired when first we met, I would have told you so."

"You might have lied."

"I might be lying now."

"I think not."

I fell silent. Should I have been flattered? I wanted to believe so, but I was not certain that Honoria's intentions were amorous. I decided to be blunt with her.

"What do you want of me, Honoria?"

"Your assistance in a certain venture."

"Again, you had only to ask."

"Not until I was certain that you would not report me to the church fathers."

"My *lares familiarum* is Consus," I said, "not the Christ."

I could see the excitement ignite in her green eyes. "Then you believe that the Circus conceals the Mouth of Hell?"

"That is my belief."

Honoria seemed satisfied, as if I had answered her questions correctly.

"How do you feel now?" she asked.

"Your ministrations have been remarkably effective," I replied.

"Come," she said, patting a folded blue garment on a little cedar table beside her, "dry yourself and put on this robe."

"Where is my own tunic?"

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"It was torn and bloody, so I had it burnt."

"Very well," I said, "I shall dress myself, as you wish."

"And we shall dine when you emerge from the bath."

With that, she left me. A mute slave entered the room, bearing a towel. I stood up and permitted him to dry my back. Donning the cerulean robe Honoria had provided, I followed the silent fellow out of the bath.

Honoria's *domus* was modest and yet elegantly appointed. I noted a shrine to Consus between the vestibule and the *triclinium.* By the time I entered her cozy dining room, the pain inside my skull had receded considerably, though I was still a bit light-headed. I reclined on a sofa next to Honoria, who wore a pale orange gown, open at the neck and adorned by a pearl necklace. Her slim legs were partially exposed, and I could not help stealing glances at them, though I knew this to be impolite.

The mute spread the *gustatio* before us: melons, grapes, figs, cakes, *pastillum,* bread, cheeses, *omasum* tripe spiced with garlic and onions, sausages, fatted goose liver, and Falernian wine. Honoria bade me eat, and I did so, ravenously. While I bolted a delicious slice of *libum,* an egg and goat cheese cake, she touched my brow lightly, examining the cut above my eye. I loved the cool feel of her fingertips. "It isn't bad at all," she said. "There will be no scar."

I accepted her prognosis, though I had my doubts. She offered me a platter laden with fruit, which I greedily devoured. As I sated my hunger, my curiosity returned, but I waited for Honoria to resume the conversation. She permitted me to eat in silence a while before speaking.

"Are you familiar with the writings of Aristarchus?" she asked.

"Aristarchus. . . ? A Greek?"

"Yes, a philosopher and scientist of some small note."

"I recall nothing of him but his name."

Honoria delicately chewed a dried fig, and swallowed before speaking. "Aristarchus wrote that the earth is not the center of the universe."

"But that is false."

"Is it?"

"Ptolemy tells us that the sun and the planets and the stars encircle the earth."

"And he is the great thinker on this subject, is he not?"

I shrugged. "The majority believe that he is."

"And thus it must be so?"

"Well . . ."

"Ah yes, *vox populi—vox dei."* Her jeering tone was unmistakable.

"You scoff at the idea of the populace sharing the gods' voices?"

"We Romans proudly declaim such fancies, though it has been four centuries since we last enjoyed anything resembling egalitarianism."

I sighed. "The Republic?"

"Yes, the Republic, that discarded ideal to which we all pledge eternal devotion." She paused thoughtfully, and then began again. "Long before the Republic or Ptolemy existed, an event occurred that proves Aristarchus correct."

"Oh?" What was she getting at?

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"Were I to tell you that travelers from the heavens came to Earth many millennia ago, what would you think? What would you say to me?"

"You refer to the gods?"

"No, not the gods."

"Angels, then? I've heard such tales, particularly from Christians."

"But this is not merely a tale, Christian or otherwise. These were not angels. They came from a spherical world that swings around a sun like ours, in the manner of Aristarchus' theories, a sun so distant that it cannot be detected by our eyes even on a clear night." Honoria sipped wine from a golden goblet, wetting her lips delectably.

"And how do you know of these beings?" I asked.

She set down the goblet and looked into my eyes. "That is difficult to explain."

I shrugged. "I have nowhere to go. You may discourse at your leisure."

Honoria stood and paced the length of the floor. She paused in front of a mosaic depicting Jupiter athwart his Olympian *curule*, his bearded face smiling as he looked down, amused by the foibles of us mortals below. I waited, and, at length, she spoke. "I have seen them."

Ever more fascinating. "Ah, and can you describe them?" I asked.

"Ghosts."

"Ghosts?"

"That is how we perceive them . . . as the spirits of the dead."

"I don't understand."

"They are corporeal, and yet contrive to resemble our deceased loved ones."

"Could such visions not be dreams? Hallucinations?"

She shook her head. "These beings are as real as you and me, Gaius."

"May anyone see them?"

"Under the proper circumstances."

"And what circumstances are those?"

"Perhaps you shall soon learn."

"Are there others who share your knowledge of these . . . travelers?"

"I may speak of no others."

I remained silent. There had always been mystery cults in Rome, and the followers of many of these cults conducted their rites clandestinely, especially since the Christians had come to power.

Even as Honoria and I conversed, Flavius Claudius Julianus labored to restore the old gods to favor throughout the Empire. The disapproving Christians knew him as "The Apostate," but those of us not in accord with their intolerant mores applauded Julian as a great Emperor. Unfortunately, the bureaucrats running the quotidian business of government were by now mostly Christian, and they compromised Julian's efforts wherever they could. He was further hampered by the current war he waged against King Sapor of Parthia. There was much ill will, and, it was rumored, much plotting against the Emperor behind shuttered windows. If Julian, with the blood of gods in his veins, could not turn back the tide of Christianity, what might become of such skeptics as Honoria and myself?

I resolved to know more of the mystical truths before they were all con-

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demned. Honoria proffered to me the opportunity to taste the strangeness of one such truth.

"I should like to see these beings for myself," I said.

Honoria looked into my eyes, and I felt a thrill as she said, "And you shall."

III: A Descent into Consus' Domain

Negotiating the maze of passageways beneath the Circus was not easy, particularly at night. We three—Honoria, Torinius, and myself—had gained entrance through an unlocked bronze gate on the Aventine side, a security breach arranged by a bribe. Once inside, we stayed close to the shadowed walls so that we would not be seen, skirted the *oppidum,* and entered a broad archway, following Honoria's directions.

It was dark, and smelled of horse manure. Torinius led us through the labyrinth with a torch gripped in his massive fist, lit from a brazier outside the entryway. A series of steps led us into the depths of the Circus. Rats scurried out of the way. We twice passed the underground sanctuary to Consus. It seemed to me that even the vermin knew the way better than Honoria, for several more wrong turns were taken before she assured us that she had gained her bearings.

Before we had set out tonight, Torinius dutifully apologized to me in a halting voice. The poor fellow could barely parse an articulate Latin sentence. And to think that I had suspected he might be Honoria's lover! I wondered what sort of punishment she had meted out to him for injuring me. It was apparently not a flogging, for his muscular, hairy back showed no marks. I am not a cruel man, and so I was relieved to see this, but I confess that there was another reason for my mercy. Torinius was just as huge and menacing as he had been the night he struck me, despite his present deferential demeanor. I did not want him to resent me, particularly in this strange, dark place.

Four days and three nights had passed since I had awakened in Honoria's bath at her home in the Subura district. We had spent the elapsed time planning our journey and visiting one *taberna* after another, buying what we needed in preparation for our journey. These purchases included camphor for torches, a strong rope, waterskins, food, and a wedge of chalk, with which we planned to mark our way on the Circus' tufa columns, so that we might not become lost upon our return. All three of us bore leather sacks strapped to our backs, bulging with these items, which were essential to the success of our venture. Honoria was clad in a man's tunic and trousers, with mountaineering boots whose leggings came to just below her knees, such as legionaries wear in alpine campaigns. I dressed in similar fashion, while Torinius sported only a belted loincloth and cleated sandals.

Xantippe and Leander had wept when I told them where I was going. Greeks that they were, they feared that once in Pluto's underworld I would never return. I was moved by their concern, and silently thanked

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my dead father for willing these two good people to me. I assured them that I intended only to descend into a hole in the earth, not into Hades. Had I but known the truth, I might not have been so foolhardy, even for the love of Honoria.

The odor of horses grew stronger, as Torinius guided us through a corridor into a sizable stable that had been dug out of the hillside. A dozing stallion was startled into consciousness as we crept past the stalls. His thrashing and snorting awakened the other steeds, who behaved as skittishly as he.

Torinius handed me the torch and swiftly began to pull down a pile of broken axles and bent chariot wheels stacked in a corner. A narrow aperture, almost invisible in the dim torchlight, had been hidden behind this innocuous rubbish pile. We squeezed through, one at a time, before anyone could investigate the horses' restiveness.

The aperture opened onto a downward sloping tunnel, and we started out. None of us spoke for some time, fearful that an attendant, guard, or groom might yet hear our voices. As we gradually descended, the tunnel broadened, and I felt that we had come far enough from the stable to speak. "The Mouth of Hell is well hidden from curious eyes," I said.

"We are not yet there," Honoria said.

Indeed, we descended still farther, until the tunnel debouched into a natural chamber. This cave curved round through the Aventine and extended back under the Circus itself.

The smell of sulfur stung my nostrils, and as we progressed the cave became uncomfortably warm, moisture dripping from its walls. We picked our way along its uneven, slanting floor like three mountain goats.

Soon a glow from ahead made the torchlight unnecessary. Nevertheless, Torinius did not douse the flame, perhaps fearing that we might find cause to flee back into the dark cave at any moment. As we advanced toward the light, I thought I heard lisping voices. These I fancied were sibilant spirits, warning us to go back.

We stopped at the brink of a vast cavern, which appeared to be lit from within. Vapors drifted through the humid air, issuing from fumaroles in the cavern's walls. It was the hiss of these gases escaping the earth that I had mistaken for voices.

"Are you frightened?" Honoria asked me.

"Yes," I answered truthfully. "This place is not for the living."

"Look up,"

I did so, and was astonished to see the sagging, travertine supports of the great Circus laid across a huge opening in the ceiling. It was not a cavern we had entered, but—just as the rites of Consus stated—a fissure.

"There is the world we know," Honoria said, and then pointed into the sulfurous maw below, "and there is the world we do not."

I nodded. Torinius made ready the rope, for the grade was sheer, and it was impossible to climb down unassisted.

"There is nothing to anchor the rope," I said.

"Torinius will lower you to the ledge below," Honoria replied. "And he will remain here, for you and I together do not possess the strength to support his weight."

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"I suppose not," I said, seeing that the ledge she pointed to appeared very narrow and far below us. "Am I to descend first?"

"Now you know why I needed a bold man for this excursion." She smiled at me.

I sighed. Torinius adjusted the rope around his middle, while Honoria looped its opposite end under my arms. Torinius then stepped back a few paces from the edge and braced himself, his powerful muscles gleaming with perspiration. Trembling, I slipped over the steaming precipice. As I began my descent, my soles slipped on the sweating stone and I barely avoided smashing headlong into the jagged wall. I swung helplessly, a human pendulum. I cried out, my terror echoing in the vast enclosure. My heart fluttered like a lark's wing.

But Torinius held fast, and the arc of my swings diminished until I dangled motionless over the Mouth of Hell, trying to catch my breath.

"Are you all right?" Honoria called down to me. I looked up to see her face peering through the sulfurous mist.

"Yes."

Torinius paid out the rope slowly, and I was lowered toward the ledge, little by little. At last, my right foot touched rock, and, a moment later, I stood on solid ground. Unlooping the rope, I winced at the burns it had left under my armpits. I looked down, straight into the dizzying abyss. Unable to see the bottom, I backed up until my spine pressed against the rough stone behind me.

Torinius raised the rope, and moments later Honoria was lowered from above. Clutching at her legs, I pulled her to me to prevent her swinging out over the chasm. I let her down gently but none too quickly, enjoying the feel of her firm, young body and moist skin. When she stood with me on the ledge, I released her from the rope. She retained her poise through it all, and I admired her more than ever for this.

She commanded Torinius to light another torch and drop it down to us. I caught it and held it so that its flame illuminated her fine features.

"And now?" I asked.

"Now we go that way." She indicated the remainder of the ledge behind me. I turned to see that the outcropping we stood on did indeed extend a goodly distance. It became a declivity that nearly joined a lower ledge, which in turn doubled back to a point some distance directly beneath our feet. We cautiously climbed down, the ledge narrowing drastically toward the end, and jumped to the wider shelf below.

As we doubled back we discovered a small cave, which had been hidden from our vantage above. Honoria took me by the hand and led me inside it. I was forced to duck my head to enter, but the ceiling rose as we progressed. We had not gone far when I saw someone huddled against the cave wall to our left. It was a woman in a loose-fitting, dark garment, a gray veil covering her hair and thin shoulders, her face turned away from us.

"Who is this?" I asked.

"One of *them,*" Honoria replied.

I thrust the torch forward to see the woman more clearly. She turned her head toward me. I nearly dropped the torch.

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For she was my mother.

"What do you see?" Honoria whispered.

I could not speak. Mother's eyes, dark and solemn, gazed lovingly into mine.

Honoria touched my elbow. "Remember that this is not what it seems."

I ignored her, overwhelmed by the impossible sight before me. A tear came to Mother's eye, gleaming in the torchlight and trembling on her cheek before dropping to the ground.

"It appears to be a loved one, does it not?" Honoria spoke anxiously, seeing that I was transfixed.

"Mother . . ." I spoke not to Honoria, but to the apparition. I wept. "Oh, Mother . . ."

"Oh, so that is what you see," Honoria said. "I warned you about this."

She wrested the torch from my slackened grip, and swung it toward Mother, as if to strike at her head.

"No!" I cried out. But even as I clutched at Honoria's arm to stop her, my mother's face transformed nightmarishly and she sprang to her feet. She fled in an inhuman gait, her veil flying off and fluttering to the cave floor. In an instant, she had vanished into the darkness.

"You see!" Honoria shouted. "It was one of them! It was not your mother!"

I had glimpsed the creature only briefly, but I knew that Honoria was right. The thing was not my mother. And yet raw emotion still surged through my heart. "You are cruel, Honoria," I said.

"Do not be angry with me, Gaius. Had I allowed that thing to seduce you, you might never have come out of this cave."

"Are they Sirens, then, luring us to our doom?"

"Perhaps."

I gathered from her expression that she too struggled with her emotions. But surely the sight of my mother had not moved her as it had moved me.

"What did *you* see, Honoria?" I asked her.

"My brother Titus," she replied softly, "dead these past seven years."

I felt foolish, and said, "Forgive me for saying that you are cruel."

She handed the torch back to me without another word, and we ventured deeper into the cave. A few paces farther on, we found the veil on the ground.

"Does power reside in this garment?" I asked, holding the torch over it.

"I think not." Honoria kept walking. I was certain from her curt manner that she was still shaken by the creature's mimicry, but it was clear that she did not wish to discuss it. Whatever she felt was locked in her heart.

I squatted and picked up the veil. It was cool to the touch, and bore a peculiar smell . . . unknown rather than unpleasant. Certainly not my mother's scent. I stuffed it into my sack and caught up with Honoria.

We followed the cave's inclination, moving deeper and deeper into the earth. The clammy, sulfurous heat stuck my tunic to my body. Honoria and I both coughed frequently, our lungs and throats burning from the inhalation of acrid vapors. Sweat stung my eyes, making it difficult for me

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to see. The farther we withdrew from the glowing fissure, the blacker this tributary cave grew. I could not prevent myself from wondering what would happen should our torch's flame gutter out.

IV: Revelations of the Dead

The Mouth of Hell had many throats with which to swallow us. By this I mean that our path led us through tributary caves several times, and then curved back to openings in the main cavern's riddled wall. At each of these openings was an outcropping of some kind, enabling us to climb down to a second, a third, and then a fourth cave, each time emerging at a lower level. If we followed the correct route, Honoria assured me, we would eventually reach our destination. She was evasive about just where our destination lay, however, and what we might find when we got there.

"Must you be so secretive?" I asked. "Do you not trust me?"

"I trust you, Gaius," she said, coughing.

"Then perhaps you should be more forthcoming."

"I know little more than you about this place. Only what I have read."

"Then how can you be sure of the route?"

"I have memorized a text that describes the way."

"Provided, no doubt, by your fellow cultists, whose names you may not pronounce."

She stopped walking, grasped my arm, and looked me in the eye with startling intensity. "I took an oath."

So emphatic was she that I said no more. Still, I was determined to find out who else knew the way to the Mouth of Hell. It seemed likely that her complicitors might be powerful men and women. Or perhaps they were merely harmless scholars, incapable of a vigorous journey such as that which Honoria and I had undertaken.

No more "ghosts" had yet appeared. For this I was thankful, for I remained deeply disturbed by the appearance of Mother's simulacrum. My heart was broken when Mother died during my sixteenth year, but I had been comforted by the certainty that her soul lingered on. Now I had seen something that should have borne out my faith in the gods, had I been unaware of the phantasm's true, dismaying nature. Such knowledge made a mockery of the afterlife.

I surely would have accepted the creature as my mother's ghost, had Honoria not acted when she did. Did this not cast doubt upon all notions of the supernatural, and thus call religion itself into question? For what is religion if not a rationale for human immortality, a vain hope that we might live on after death in pale imitation of the Olympians? These subterranean beings flouted our most dearly held beliefs.

"Through here," Honoria said, interrupting my solemn reverie. We came out of the fourth cave and climbed onto a promontory, whence we looked down into the Mouth of Hell once again. But now the vast fissure's floor was at last within sight, though partly obscured by noxious vapors. The humidity was almost intolerable at this depth.

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"This is the final part of our journey," Honoria informed me. I looked up and saw that we were well around to the far side of the cavern from where we had started. This I deduced from the positions of the caves opposite and above us. I could no longer see the Circus' massive supports through the heavy mist, though the light coming from below was brighter than before. It seemed to emanate from the fissure's very bottom.

As we trudged through the final tributary cave, I tried to enthuse myself. Honoria and I were soon to explore a world that few, if any, other human beings had seen. But the gloom shrouding my soul refused to subside. The vile air of this place and the tedious descent had exhausted me, oppressing my heart. But what troubled me most was the memory of Mother's perfect, living replica. What manner of monster could delve into one's soul and reshape itself into the very image of a deceased parent or sibling?

The torch went out. I morbidly imagined that we really had descended into the next world, for the cave's atmosphere was decidedly hellish. In such a place, we might have unwittingly passed from life to death, and continued on in darkness throughout eternity.

But then I perceived a faint phosphorescence, and we stumbled toward it. Honoria coughed uncontrollably. Soon after that, she fell, but I managed to catch her. She had fainted for a moment, the victim of heat and the vile atmosphere. Despite her protests, I supported her weight until we exited the cave.

We stepped out onto the fissure's capacious floor shortly thereafter. Nothing lay ahead of us but an expanse of declivitous stone and jutting fumaroles that emitted poisonous vapors. The hiss of escaping gases was loudest here at the fissure's floor.

We decided to rest, and to eat and drink before going on. We sat with our backs against the rock wall, next to the cave mouth from which we had lately emerged.

"Why have we seen no more of the creatures?" said I, my voice echoing in the cavern's vast interior.

"They hide from us," Honoria said.

"Why?" I asked her.

"Because their mimicry of the dead does not frighten us."

"*I'm* frightened," I said.

"But you know they are not ghosts, and that their powers are not supernatural. They are physical beings, even as you and I."

"It must be so," I agreed, "for the one we encountered feared the torch."

"Did it speak to you before it fled?"

"I heard nothing."

"Nor did I."

"Such a being surely has no need for speech," I reasoned.

Honoria nodded. "They are to humans as are we to the wild beasts."

"Wild beasts are fearsome."

"Are they afraid of us, then?" Honoria asked me.

"Perhaps, for men are by nature predators."

"Let us find out who fears whom the most, us or them." And with that Honoria stood, shouldered her supply sack, and started out purposefully.

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It hardly seemed plausible that she had swooned a short time before. I groaned as I got to my feet, but soon was marching in step with her across the sultry fissure's tapering floor.

Father came to me a short while later. Or at least something that resembled him came to me. He kept pace with us, but remained at a distance. The thick, sulfurous mist separating us made him seem like a figure from a dream. I struggled to remember that this was an illusion, but my heart nearly burst with love for poor Father. I sought relief from my sorrow by contrasting Honoria's vision with my own.

"What do you see?" I asked her, my voice cracking.

"My cousin Mardonia, who perished of an ague when we were girls of twelve years." This she told me through tightly pressed lips.

The thing stepped out of the mist and stared at us. It was clad in a simple homespun garment, much like one that Father had always worn when he supervised the workers in our garden. It *was* him standing before me, and yet I knew that it could not be.

"This sight is hard to bear," I said.

"You must remain steadfast, or we shall never learn the truth."

"I will not fail you, Honoria."

She made no attempt to drive away the creature, convinced that I was not taken in by it. This time I was determined to remain wary. Even so, childhood memories flitted through my mind, while my tear-filled eyes lingered on the flawless likeness of my father. I fought against this nostalgic onslaught. Soon I weakened, however, for the illusion was so powerful. Could this actually be my father's shade? And if it was. . . ? There was much that had not yet been spoken between us when he died.

"You were not a failure, Father," I whispered, my eyes brimming.

I sensed, rather than saw, Honoria turn toward me. "Do not be deceived by this creature," she said in a commanding tone.

"I know that this is not my father," I said, never taking my eyes from the specter. "And yet . . ."

Father's imitator turned and began to walk away from us. It stopped only once, peered over its shoulder, and gesticulated.

I glanced at Honoria. "What does it want?"

"It wants us to follow it," Honoria said, "does it not?"

"I think so."

"Our destination is near," she said.

We followed the phantom. Another joined it. This one assumed the form of my dear maternal grandmother, who died in Antioch when I was five. I did not ask Honoria what she saw, respecting her memories with my silence.

As we walked, the ground curved gently downhill. More and more of the creatures joined us, until Honoria and I were surrounded by them. Few of these bothered to assume the forms of the deceased, and so I saw them clearly for the first time. Duplicated here a dozenfold was the nightmarish being I had glimpsed in the chamber above. The ungainly rhythm of their movements, their gangling limbs, liquid faces, and staring, black eyes—all of these were exceedingly strange. They wore the clothing of women and men, but they were not human.

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Still more of them stepped forth and marched with us. In spite of their increasing numbers, the only sounds were sulfurous geysers jetting from fumarole spouts. Father's face bunched and shifted back to its actual form, as did Grandmother's. But these were slow and graceful changes, not jarring transmogrifications as we had seen before. The fissure's denizens had at last shown themselves as they truly were.

"They have looked into our minds, and found no rancor," I said. "They welcome us."

"Perhaps," Honoria opined, "or perhaps they merely feel more courageous in their numbers."

By now, hundreds of them walked silently on our every side. We were hemmed in, imprisoned in a living cage that flowed across the subterranean landscape like pale lava.

"If we are to them wild beasts, they will wish to domesticate us," Honoria said. "Or devour us."

I was about to argue that supposition with her when I was diverted by what lay ahead.

"Look, Honoria!" I cried.

It was the source of the phosphorescence. We descended into a depression in the fissure's floor. This led us to a carved path widening around an immense pit, which housed a glowing structure. As we descended toward this building (for so I believed it to be), I saw that its contours were as unearthly as the creatures themselves. I might be capable of drawing a crude sketch of it, but I cannot describe it. The creatures who walked with us, and those milling about below us, seemed at home in this place. It was a part of their world they had brought *with* them to ours. Was it their dwelling place, a palace, a temple? I could only guess at its purpose.

We left the path and crossed a foot-bridge. On its far side, we entered the building through an opening, and passed through a number of curving corridors and oddly configured rooms. At last we came to a brightly lit chamber. The creatures had herded us here, but they did not follow us inside this room.

The chamber's neatly sectioned shelves contained hundreds of scrolled books, a desk, and chair. A pale, middle-aged woman sat at a table, a *stylo* gripped lightly in her trembling hand as she composed yet another screed for this subterranean library. She stopped writing when she saw us enter.

"Honoria," she said, surprised. She pushed back her chair and rose with some difficulty, staring straight at Honoria with large, green eyes.

Honoria approached her diffidently; her voice quavered as she asked the woman, "Do I see you truly, or are you but another of these mimics?"

"Oh, my child, do you not know me?" the woman said, coming slowly around the table to embrace Honoria. "I am Lavinia, your mother."

Now all of the anguish that Honoria held within her heart poured forth, and she collapsed into her mother's arms. Lavinia spoke soothing words to her, as if to a little girl, and stroked her hair until Honoria's sobbing ceased. Lavinia tenderly wiped away Honoria's tears with her fingers, and said, "So our text found its way to you."

"Yes, I memorized it and destroyed it, as you instructed."

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"It has taken so long that I despaired of seeing you this one last time, Honoria."

One *last* time. Clearly Lavinia was weak and sickly, though her beauty had not been extinguished by her illness. For how many years had she inhaled the toxic air that so weakened Honoria and me? Soon she would be gone. When Honoria had mourned long enough, perhaps she would love me for helping her find her dying mother. These were my selfish thoughts at that moment, I am shamed to say.

"The creatures brought us to you," Honoria told her mother.

"Yes, they are our friends, if we but permit them to be."

"Our friends. . . ?"

"Most humans fear them, but they do not intend to frighten us."

"What *do* they intend?"

"They transform to touch us, to disarm us. They desire but to share in the reverence we hold for our dead. And they welcome us to their world, if we come peacefully."

"I suspected that they were welcoming us," said I.

Lavinia turned her face toward me, coughed, and said, "Who is your companion?"

Honoria introduced us, and Lavinia smiled. "You are a brave man to accompany my daughter here, Gaius."

"What is this building?" I asked her.

"It is not a building, but the remnant of a colossal ship that bore these beings to our world long ago," she said. "Its impact tore the earth asunder and created the Mouth of Hell."

"A shipwreck . . ." I recalled the Circus' splintered chariots.

"You have seen falling stars?"

"Often, when I was a boy in Syria."

"They are in reality not stars, but stones hurtling through the void till they collide with Earth. Such was the fate of this vessel and its occupants."

"The Mouth of Hell is a crater?"

"Yes, a vast crater. The Circus was built over it, a monument to their dead."

"Can they ever return to their world?"

"No." This she said with sadness.

I swayed a bit, the heat adversely affecting me. "You live among these beings?"

Her body was suddenly racked with a coughing spasm that made her

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eyes redden and water. Lavinia wiped her mouth, and I saw the red stain of her blood on the handkerchief. She was unable to continue for a moment.

"My husband and I came here to study these miraculous beings," she said at last, "to record their ways for posterity." She gestured at the scrolls. "We have learned much from our friends, and yet there is so much more to learn. Rome's current religious fanaticism will not tolerate such a chronicle, but Honoria's father and I dared hope that one day . . ."

"Where is Father?" Honoria eagerly asked her.

Lavinia's sad gaze held her daughter's eyes.

"Where is he?" Honoria's tone was urgent. "Where is my father?"

Lavinia turned toward the door. Honoria remained still for the moment, but then she turned and saw who stood there. I, too, saw him.

It was our beloved Emperor himself, Flavius Claudius Julianus, just as I had seen him in Constantinople. Except that he was attired in neither engraved *lorica* nor gold-bordered cape of the imperial purple. He wore a homespun, loose tunic and trousers. His sensitive face was bearded, and his philosopher's eyes seemed to stare directly into my soul.

I must have gaped, seeing Julian the Apostate in this extraordinary place. But what I saw next confounded me still more.

"Father!" Honoria ran toward the Emperor, her eyes filled with boundless love.

"Honoria! No!" I shouted. The Emperor is father to us all, but only figuratively. We may not approach him with impunity. She ignored my warning.

"This is not your father," Lavinia said before Honoria could fling herself into Julian's arms.

Honoria stopped short of touching the Emperor. Her mother's words confused her. She looked from one parent to the other and back again. "But of course it's Father."

"No, your father died more than two years ago, done in by the foul air of this place."

"But he stands here before—"

I think I guessed the truth at the same instant Honoria did. This was no more her father than it was the Emperor. The creature's features shivered and squirmed into their original shape. It backed away from the door and was lost to my sight.

"No, no, no! Oh, please! No!" Honoria fell to the floor and wailed her grief.

Lavinia went to Honoria, drew her to her feet, and embraced her. I still stared at the empty doorway. My ambivalence was overmastered by my dread. I understood what Honoria had seen, but what was the meaning of *my* vision? I revered and loved Julian, and feared for the future of the Empire after his passing. Why did the creature show me *his* likeness?

Honoria ceased weeping, sniffled, and turned to me. "Did you see him, Gaius?" she asked me. "Did you see my father?"

"I . . . I did not, Honoria," I answered truthfully. A heaviness seemed to have descended upon me. My brain felt as if it would burst. I gasped, my

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lungs unable to take in enough air to sustain me. The entire chamber seemed to press in upon me, the heat overwhelming me. I remember no more.

V: Return to Earth

I awoke on the precipice overlooking the Mouth of Hell. Torinius squatted next to me, his broad face expressionless as he gazed out into the mist.

"Water. . . ." I managed to croak that single word.

Torinius turned to me slowly, and handed me a half-filled waterskin. I lifted it to my mouth with shaking hands and drank, pouring some of the tepid water over my face. Soon I felt a little of my strength returning.

"Honoria. . . ?"

"The ghosts did not bring back my mistress," Torinius said. Honoria had stayed with her mother.

"It was the same with her parents Lavinia and Horatius years ago," Torinius added. "Only you have returned from the Mouth of Hell."

"I am sorry, Torinius," I said. "Truly."

Honoria had been honest with me. She had wanted my help, not my love. I would never have her, and this I resigned myself to as I peered down into the Mouth of Hell for the last time. "It is as she wished," I said.

Torinius shook his head. "It is as the ghosts wish, not my mistress."

"She will not return," I said. "You must come with me."

But he shook his massive head once again. It would do me no good to plead with him.

After I had eaten a bit of dried fruit and drunk more water, I stood on unsteady feet and announced that I was about to climb back up to the world of the living. Torinius did not even glance at me. I lit a torch and left him.

That was the last time I saw the loyal Torinius. For all I know, he waits there still.

My ascent was slow, for I was still weak. I looked for our chalk marks to help me find my way. The cavern passed before my eyes like a dream. And then I was in the connecting tunnel. A distant roar echoed through its narrow confines as I approached the Circus. In my delirium, I imagined that it was the sea's waves breaking on an invisible shore. I remember squeezing through the aperture at the tunnel's end, and entering the stable. I stumbled through the jumble of axles and chariot wheels, nearly falling, for the attendants had not yet restacked them. Perhaps they had not even noticed the disarray. I saw that no horses were in the stalls.

Thunder shook the deserted stable, startling me. I heard not the anger of the gods, but the cacophony of the mob. The races were in session. I staggered through the Circus' underground passageways, seeking daylight as desperately as a drowning man seeks air. I heard horse's hooves before I saw the first of several teams being led back to their stalls. Puzzled grooms took a moment from their winded charges to stare at me.

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One of them directed me to Consus' sanctuary, and I found the way from there. I mounted the steps to the surface, emerged from the shadows, and exulted as the sun warmed my face. The cheering of the mob seemed to echo my joy as I all but crawled out of the *cavea* and re-entered the world of the living.

I don't know exactly where I collapsed, but some kind soul summoned a physician. After the doctor treated me, he sent me home in his own litter, saying that I needed nothing more than rest to recover.

Leander and Xantippe were ecstatic when I arrived at my rooms that evening. They had been certain that I would never return, for I had been gone two nights and two days. Together we shed copious, happy tears. I was so touched by their display of affection I revealed to them that my will stipulated their manumission, in the event of my premature death. At that moment, I decided not to wait, but to free them immediately. And it was done. Even so, they stayed with me all the remaining years of their lives.

Before we left Rome, the news came from the east that Julian had been slain in battle, after retreating from the Parthian capital of Ctesiphon. The Christians celebrated in their thousands, crowding the narrow streets, and everywhere blathering about the will of God. It was rumored that the Apostate had been slain by one of his own, but no evidence of such treachery came to light. Nor would it, I suppose, with the Christians in control of the Empire's bureaucratic machinery. Now Jovian, one of their own, sat on the throne as the new Emperor. Their death cult's tenets would become law, and the old gods would be consigned to the nether provinces for all time. The Rome that had civilized the world was no more.

And so we sailed home to Constantinople, my freed slaves and I. The voyage was uneventful, and we arrived at the teeming eastern capital in good time. My familial *domus* became my refuge, and I live in it to this day. Our shrine to Consus yet stands in the vestibule. Let the Christians come and smash it, and let them arrest me for the sin of heresy. I care not.

I resumed my duties upon my return, immersing myself in my work. And yet my life has not been the same since I came back from Rome. My mirror still reflects a faint cicatrix over one eye where Torinius struck me. Often, when I see this scar, I recall awakening in Honoria's private bath. In my mind, she remains young and beautiful. I will never see the mature woman she might have become.

Has Honoria divined the unearthly mysteries? Does she yet live? This I doubt, for the vapors of the pit nearly killed me in two short days. I am saddened beyond measure to think of her dying in that sealed crater beneath Rome's great Circus.

I will never marry. Honoria was the only woman I have ever truly loved, and I shall remain faithful to her memory.

When I cannot sleep at night, I open an ivory chest that I purchased before leaving Rome, and withdraw from it two garments. One is the cerulean robe that Honoria gave me to replace my ruined tunic. The other is a gray veil that even now possesses an otherworldly scent. O

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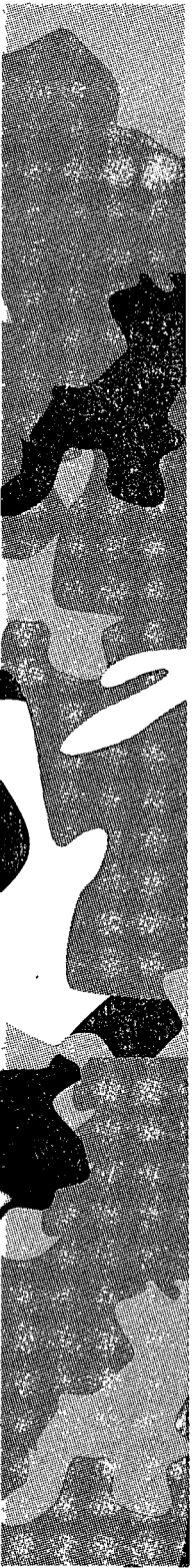

Alternate History

No one in fatigues has ever walked point
Down Chestnut Trails
Between the carefully mown lawns
And swing sets, ducking not to snag
The barrel of a rifle
On my neighbor's ornamental cherry.
The sound of helicopter rotors
Has never roused me from cold sleep.
Planes at night don't rumble–
Wait the concussive shock
Of cluster bombs. Nor do I
Wonder if my son, digging a bike jump
Will find a landmine.
The grocery is open and hums the fluorescent purr
Of a refrigerator. The shelves are full
Of honey Dijon salad dressing, Pop Tarts
Cheetos and Fritos and Cheerios,
Cold yellow butter.
I have never stood in line
For canned milk and clean water.
The heat always works in winter.
Boys in fatigues never knocked on my door,
Walked through my house,
Pointed to my husband and son, said,
"Come with me." I have never
Watched them walk my men across Tinker's Creek
Towards the baseball diamond
Straining to see the light
Shine on the fine blond of my boy's hair,
And listened for the distant
Firecracker pop pop pop
Of gunfire.

–Maureen McHugh

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FROM THE CORNER OF MY EYE

Alexander Glass

Alexander Glass, a legal case worker in a firm of solicitors, lives in London with his wife. He's had work published in such British magazines as *Interzone* and *The Third Alternative.* A couple of these stories have been nominated for British Fantasy Awards. The following tale is his first story to appear in an American publication.

I turned to look, but she was gone.

At once I rose to my feet, tossed a few corroded Dirham-Pesetas on to the table, and set off in the direction I thought she had gone. My coffee was left behind, untouched—I had been just about to wet my beard—beside my doubled-up copy of the El Puente *Gazette.* Hassan would probably be offended, the more so as I had left him a colossal tip, but I told myself I would explain it to him later. I doubted that he would understand. I was not sure I understood myself.

It was not lust, nothing so innocent. Lust can turn a man's head, but would hardly have sent me running through the crowds as the evening shadows arched their backs lazily across El Puente's central street. It rarely sends me scuttling between cars and camels, tourists and thieves, motorbikes and merchants and mystics, with Spain somewhere behind me and Morocco somewhere ahead. I could not even remember the woman's face. But there had been something about her, something that the rest of the evening crowd on El Puente ignored or simply did not see; and it is my business to see things that other people do not, even if I am not sure myself what those things might be.

I found that my hand had leapt up to my throat, though the cowrie shell I had once worn there was long gone. Kirsten's shell. Perhaps the woman reminded me of her. I can no longer remember. If so, I was not aware of it at the time.

I activated my Ghostbane, though, to be safe.

A battered Volkswagen van crawled past, leaving me dancing from one

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foot to the other in undignified impatience. I reached out and touched its side with my first two fingers: some of the cars on the road were themselves augmentations, though this one seemed solid enough. When it was finally gone, I saw a figure seated ahead of me, on the edge of a fountain. A stout figure in a suit of tweed, stroking a comically large moustache and smoking an absurdly small cigarillo. It was the Englishman, Harris. The cloth of his suit was certainly a Virtua augmentation, and I suspected the moustache was also, as it had a habit of making little motions and gestures to give emphasis to his words. The cigarillo was real, though: I could smell its reek from five paces. As usual, I could not be sure whether Harris was laughing at me; but I thought he might be of some use. Like me, he often saw things that other people did not.

"Montoya," he called, his voice muffled by moustache and cigarillo. "I'm afraid you're going the wrong way. Spain's behind you. With practice, you know, you can work it out from the position of the sun."

He gestured to his left, to the west: behind the ramshackle buildings of El Puente, the sun was plunging into the sea, wreathed in a halo of pink and orange clouds like a handful of silken scarves. Augmented, of course: the Spanish and Moroccan governments paid jointly for the local Virtua sunsets, as a matter of pride.

"I know which way Spain is," I said. "I'm looking for a woman."

"Really?" he asked, lightly. "I may be able to help you. Of course, it depends what kind of a woman you're looking for." He looked away, and became suddenly very concerned with a caged bird, colored scarlet and sapphire, in the doorway of a nearby shop.

I stared at him. "A woman no one else seemed to notice," I said deliberately, "but who caught my eye at once."

"Yes, yes, all right." He seemed irritated, perhaps because he had hoped to hide the fact that he had seen her. "Medside. Stairwell fifty. But it isn't what you think. Not a Ghost. Not a job for the blind man."

"I'll see about that."

"Yes, Montoya, I think you will."

Harris tossed the cigarillo deliberately into the fountain, as if the taste of it had suddenly turned bitter. It rolled into the basin and lay there, smoldering. Of course, the stone of the basin was real enough, but the falling water was only an augmentation. The sound of it came from a trio of speakers in the fountain's base: old-fashioned, designed before Virtua went auditory. The water was beautiful, but could not douse a flame.

Business had been slow, these past few weeks. There was the usual lull before the next round of fiestas, when the Ghosts would try to sneak through. They would generate from the first night onward, among the crowds and costumes, the noise, the special augmentations laid on by the Alcalde, who took a particular pride in showing off El Puente's capacity for virtual effects. The increased dataflow meant that the monitors might not notice the localized surge of a Ghost emerging.

At the same time, new hunters had arrived, and there was competition to catch what Ghosts there were. I still made enough to get by, enough to

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be careless of the coins I had flung on to the table at Hassan's café, but not usually enough to feed my one peculiar vice.

Telling myself that this was the reason for my sense of urgency, I ran like a madman to Medside, and along the edge of El Puente to stairwell fifty; and there I saw her. She had kicked open a door marked "No Entry," climbed over the edge and down the stairwell itself, and was sitting on a hexagonal platform some way down, looking out over the waves.

After only a moment's hesitation, I climbed down to join her. She nodded to me, seemingly unsurprised by my presence, but said nothing. She gave no sign that she knew I had been following her.

I found myself tracing her gaze across the water. The sea was flooded with red-gold light from the setting sun, but the structure of El Puente itself stood between us and the sunset. Looking east, we saw the shadow of the bridge, black slabs of darkness from its pillars lying cold upon the water, the webwork of girders like cracks in the dying light. Further away, the brilliant blue of the sea faded into a hazy blackness, matching the darkening curve of the sky. Smiling, I wondered who had thought to program an augmentation from this vantage point. It was unusual for anyone to climb down over the edge of El Puente. Perhaps it had been the Alcalde himself, proud perfectionist that he was, deciding to show off to the ships passing beneath the bridge, between the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. Then I realized it was not an augmentation at all. This was real light on real water, cut by real shadows, under a real sky. I was obscurely disappointed: I had been admiring the skill of some nameless Virtua programmer, but now had nothing to admire except the mindless workings of nature.

There was something wrong, too, about the girl. She looked out of place. Her outfit was too simple: blue jeans, white shirt, shoes the color of dust, unless they were simply dusty. I could hear her movements, her breathing. I could smell a soft perfume, and a trace of soap and sweat beneath it. The scent was oddly familiar.

She did remind me of Kirsten, but she was not Kirsten. Of course not: how could she have been? Perhaps that was the only reason for my sense of wrongness; but I still felt there was something else.

The girl twisted around to stare up at me, narrowing her eyes. "You're one of them, aren't you? A hunter."

I nodded.

She looked away, then looked back, frowning. "I know your face. You're Montoya. The one they call the blind man."

I nodded again. "I didn't realize I was famous."

"Only to other hunters, and to Ghosts. . . ." She did not say which she was, or whether she was either one or the other. Instead she went on: "Fame isn't a good thing, for a hunter."

"That depends. Sometimes a reputation can bring in work."

"Or frighten it away."

"That, too."

"So have you made up your mind about me?"

I shook my head. "You're too good to be a Ghost; and Virtua can't do scent—or break open doors. But I can't get any readings from you. No augmentation: no data flow. Maybe you have a secure loop to generate

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your augmentations, but I can't see why you'd need it. I can't read a credit line, or a tag number. Not even a name."

"My name is Anila." She smiled, a mocking smile. "Do I look too ordinary? Not enough decoration? Maybe my secure loop is to generate a face, instead of clothes and ornaments. To cover up a scar, a botched job of rhinoplasty. Who knows?"

"No, I don't believe it. It's my business to know an augmentation when I see one, and I don't see one."

"That's right. You don't." She hesitated, not knowing how to ask the question she wanted to ask. I waited. I already knew what it would be. At last she said: "Were you really blind?"

I sat down beside her, cross-legged, took a breath, let it out. The taste of salt was on my lips. The sound of the sea filled the time it took me to find an answer. "Yes, for a time. There was an . . . accident. They had to repair my optic nerve. I had to have new bio-implants grown. Then they had to make sure that was working before they could reconnect my visual cortex to Virtua. They cut the auditory connection, too, until I was fixed. There was no alternative but to live with it."

"So you sharpened your other senses. Auditory, olfactory, tactile. And now you can catch a Ghost, because they don't sound right, and they have no smell."

"Some of them don't even look right. And anyone can tell a Ghost by grabbing hold of their arm: if there's nothing there, you've caught your Ghost. You don't need a blind man for that.

"But it isn't just sharpening your senses. Your perception changes. You learn to create a new model of the world, minus its visual element. A mental map, but more than that, a . . . a *virtual* copy of what is out there, beyond your body. Everything your senses tell you, everything you touch or taste, every echo in the air, adds something to the map. I still have that map in my head. And when the map doesn't fit what I see, then I've usually seen a Ghost."

"Not this time."

"No, not this time. You're almost the opposite of a Ghost, aren't you? They're only virtual; you're only real."

She laughed. Then she got to her feet, and touched my arm. Proving she was real, solid; perhaps telling me that this was enough. Her point made, she moved toward the stairwell. She had one parting shot to make, though.

"Tell me, Señor Montoya: you're the blind man. Have you ever seen the Invisibles?"

Then she was climbing, her laughter falling like the droplets in the fountain, and had vanished before I could ask her what she meant.

After she had gone, I sat alone a while, as the shadow of El Puente lengthened over the Mediterranean, and the gold of the sunset turned to blood, and then to blackness. From below, I fancied I could hear the slow hum of the Ghostmakers, the Virtua generators, at the bottom of the sea. I waited until the last drop of real, unaugmented light had drained away. Then I climbed back up to the bridge, to explain things to Hassan.

* * *

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He had left his son in charge of the café, and hidden himself away in the back. I elbowed my way unceremoniously to the bar, and the boy nodded me through, raising a coffee cup to me ironically as I ducked beneath the little whitewashed arch that led to Hassan's private rooms.

I expected to find him with Leila, of course; but I was surprised to find him asleep, snoring gently and almost melodiously upon a heap of cushions, his hands clasped over his stomach. For some reason, Leila was still there, still manifest, sitting cross-legged on the rug, her small honey-brown hands open in front of her. Glancing up at me as I entered, she raised a finger to her lips, and, for an instant, I saw the outline of her mouth beneath her flimsy green half-veil.

Whoever had programmed her had done a remarkable job.

"He is sleeping," she said, unnecessarily, and then, a little defensively: "I like to be there when he wakes. What would he think of me otherwise? What kind of wife would I be?"

There was nothing I could say. Embarrassed, I rubbed at the back of my head, feeling the tiny irregularity in the skull where the Virtua bio-implants had gone in.

Leila said: "You do not like this. You think it is wrong."

I raised my palms to her. "It's no business of mine."

"No. But still you think it is wrong. You think he should let me go—switch me off."

"Really, I don't have an opinion." I met her eyes. "If I were Hassan, and I lost someone like you, maybe I'd do the same. But I am only myself, and my loss was of a different kind. So I'll reserve my judgment."

"What have you lost, Señor Montoya? You used to wear a shell at your throat," she observed. "Is it that you have lost?"

"Go to Hell."

"I have. Yet I am here. In this way," she murmured, "he has not really lost me."

I shook my head. "Somewhere deep down, he knows he has. You're his dream. He might dream about you until he dies. Or he might wake up.

"I remember Leila," I went on. "You look like her. You sound like her. You have the accent, and the mannerisms, and the memories. You'd probably pass a Turing test more easily than I could. But you're not Leila, not really."

She turned away, so that I would not see an augmented tear. "I am myself. Like you, Montoya, I am only myself. I do not hide what I am."

"A simulacrum. A shared hallucination. A Virtua woman. A Ghost."

"Yes, a Ghost. And you are a Ghost hunter, a Ghost killer. You frighten me."

"I'm sorry. But I wouldn't hunt you. You're legal. Hassan's license is in order. Besides, as you said, you don't hide what you are."

She looked back at me then, defiant. "If I could, I would. If I could pass for real. If you could smell me, touch me, if I had weight, substance. Would I be real then, Señor Montoya?"

We sat in silence a moment, the Ghost, the blind man, and the sleeper. I had no answer to her question—and if I did, I might not have the heart to tell her. Luckily, the sleeper stirred and woke, and Leila and I both pretended the conversation had not happened.

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"Montoya," Hassan mumbled. Then a frown divided his brow, and he said: "You dare to come back here, after spurning my best coffee?"

"I need help. I want you to run a scan."

"Another insult: your bio-implant was the best your filthy money could buy. There can be nothing wrong with it."

"Hassan, I misread someone today. I went hunting a Ghost, and she turned out to be human. Not only human, but without any augmentation at all. My senses failed me, my instincts failed me—and my diagnostics failed me."

The corners of his mouth turned down. "Everyone makes mistakes, Montoya."

"That's what I thought, at first. But the more I think about it, the less I like it. My diagnostics found nothing, nothing at all. No one walks around with no augmentation at all, not even an identification, a tag."

"Unusual, but not impossible."

"Unusual? When was the last time you saw anyone without augmentation? Here on El Puente? If you go down south, past Ojo Cerrado, you'll meet a few. If you go as far as Saqt al-Zand, you'll find nothing else. But on El Puente? I don't believe it. But all right, my friend, let's say it's just unusual. There were a couple of other things, too: things I only realized after I left. First, Harris wanted me to see her. In that sneaky way of his, he sent me to her, making it seem as if he was reluctant to do it. In fact, that must have been the only reason he was there."

"And second?"

"When I say my diagnostics found nothing, I mean they found nothing. I didn't even realize it, but it's been nagging at me all the way back from the edge: I couldn't sense *her* diagnostics, either. Now, maybe I can accept that someone might choose to have no augmentation at all. There's no law against wearing your own face. But no diagnostics? How does she know who she's talking to? How does she know where she's going? How does she know the prices of things? How does she keep in contact with her family, her friends, her work or school? She must have a pathfinder and a messenger, at the very least. And as far as I could see, she didn't have them. Which means—"

Hassan sat up on his elbow, frowning. He knew well enough what it meant. "Did she say what her name was?"

"Yes . . ." I pulled it out of an auditory buffer. "Anila. She told me it was Anila."

Hassan and Leila exchanged a glance. Then Hassan hauled himself to his feet.

"Very well. We will scan you." He bared his teeth. "And then you will drink that cup of coffee. I've saved it for you."

In the middle of wiring me in, Hassan paused, and that frown divided his brow again. This was slightly illegal, of course, though I doubted that would make him hesitate. No: he had realized that he was feeding my peculiar vice, and that he was doing it gratis. I normally had to pay Harris for the privilege, when I could afford it. He was very expensive, and very rude, in that particular way the English have; but better Harris than

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some fumbling amateur. You never know when someone's hand might slip, or what might happen if it does.

"You've done this before, Montoya. You must be used to it."

"Not really. But go ahead."

I did not see him touch the switch. For a moment, I was not aware that anything had changed at all. Then I moved my head—and the room seemed to move with me, everything frozen in time, until, a few seconds later, the image began to fade. The still picture of the room grew dim, the bright cloth hangings fading as if, before my eyes, they were aging, turning to dust. Then they were gone altogether. The optic interface was disconnected. All I could see was the world fed through my bio-implant: the augmented world.

When I walked in Virtua, I liked best to wander the streets of El Puente: the random augmentations carried toward me, and past me, and away; the radiance of the sea and sky, without the sea and sky behind them, but only endless darkness; the gaudy shop-fronts, the tracery of the stones in the main street, the landmarks, the shimmering statues, the floating lights. I had spent hours sitting before the fountain, watching the water rise and fall, unable to see the stone of the basin itself, only an augmented marker, a circle on the ground, probably an aid to perspective left there by the programmer. I remembered the droplets, appearing in empty space, leaping, tumbling, glittering coldly in the Virtua light.

Beyond it, I remembered the entrance to the old electronics market, its canvas walls invisible now, the lights within moving like fireflies. Above the entrance, a sign hung in the air, glowing in Virtua neon. No one used real neon signs any more.

I remembered a woman emerging from the market, her hands marked with red-gold Virtua henna, her face hidden by a Virtua bird mask, an augmented cloak trailing from her shoulders. Tiny blue sparks seemed to jump and vanish in the cloth.

Hassan's room was interesting, too, in its way. There were fewer augmentations than I had thought: a few ornaments, a Jack Vettriano painting, some lighting effects: Virtua candles casting Virtua shadows. There was no tracery around the edges of the room, and so the candles were the only way I had of knowing the size of the room, its dimensions. Hassan himself wore augmentations on his clothes, and augmented rings on his fingers, but his face was entirely natural: so in Virtua he seemed like a headless man, hollow, his shape defined by lines of red and gold.

Leila, of course, looked just as she had before; the Ghost appeared more real than the living man.

I could not see myself. In Virtua, I was invisible. Perhaps that was what I liked about walking in Virtua.

"Don't move," Hassan was saying. "You're still wired up. It won't take that long to check your diagnostics."

"You will find nothing," Leila said, softly, almost sadly. I wondered how she could be so sure.

I thought of the girl, Anila—how this would appear to her. If she had no diagnostics, no connection to Virtua at all, then she would see none of it. The fountain would be an empty stone bowl. The market would be a long,

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featureless tent of drab, unornamented cloth. The woman in the bird mask would be no different than any other woman. And this other world, this Virtua, would be nothing but blackness to her.

Except, of course, that the girl must have had diagnostics. She might have had no augmentations, or chosen not to wear the ones she had, but diagnostics were essential on El Puente. Without them, the place was just a causeway across the Mediterranean: three parallel streets of shops and houses, a place to live or to visit or just to pass through. A place like any other. And in any event, life without diagnostics was hideously impractical. Hassan had reached the same conclusion I had: either my diagnostics were faulty, or the girl had a secure loop with enough protection to fool me. And if she had a loop that secure, then we wanted to know about it.

"Nothing," Hassan said at last. "As I said: your connection, and your diagnostics, are the best money can buy."

"Which means," I said, "that the girl must have data-protection money *can't* buy."

"AI-generated?"

"Without a doubt. And if it's AI-generated, then the Ghosts could be planning to use it. Something to keep the hunters away, the next time they come through."

Hassan's invisible hand rose up to stroke his invisible beard. "Maybe."

"You don't seem convinced, my friend."

Hassan said nothing. He turned away, and I saw Leila reach out to him, a reassuring touch—a touch he could not feel.

At last, he said: "Maybe it doesn't matter, Montoya. So what if they come?"

I said nothing. Leila looked at me, gauging my reaction. Then she left, without a word, without a sound. Outside the room—visible to me, but not to Hassan—she vanished altogether, her body dissolving like smoke.

Seeing Leila disappear, I thought of another reason I wanted to find the girl. She had mentioned the Invisibles. I had thought she was just taunting me, but now I was not sure. Perhaps she knew something. Perhaps she had seen them, whatever they were. Higher-level AIs? Virtua gods? Alien Ghosts in the network? If the girl knew anything at all, it would be something worth knowing.

With a sigh, Hassan touched a switch, and the real world began to take shape again. I was not glad to see it back.

That night I went looking for Harris along the central street. The sidestreets were sleeping, more or less, but the central street stayed alive. At night, people's augmentations became wilder, almost as if they themselves were taking advantage of the dark, and the freedom that came with it. I saw a woman with scales and a prehensile tail snaking from beneath her heavy black skirt; and it struck me that if a real lizard woman ever did walk the central street, no one would ever notice. One man had a subroutine that scanned his head and projected it beneath his arm; an Elizabethan costume completed the picture. The scan was not perfect, though: I could see a very slight shimmer in the empty space above his shoulders. There were even some Virtua creatures—owls were popular

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this year—and, out of habit, I ran diagnostic checks on them all, to make sure they were properly licensed, and properly chained to their owners.

I did not know whether finding Harris would do me any good, but I knew that he knew something. He had not even tried to hide it; when I had asked about the girl, he had all but stuck his arm out to show me which way she had gone. So he knew, and he wanted me to know that he knew. He let me share a little of his knowledge only because it suited his plans, whatever they were.

I knew where the Englishman would be. I took an autorickshaw along the central street toward the north end of the bridge, and had the driver set me down on the corner. For some reason I did not want anyone to know where I was going.

Leaving the central street behind, I crossed over to a small building whose face looked out over the Atlantic. A building with no augmentations at all, no decorations, no name above the door, not even a listing in the Virtua map. If you had one of their calling cards, it would lead you to the door, but the cards were few and far between. Even so, the place had no shortage of clients. As I entered, a man was just leaving: a man in a top hat and a shadowy greatcoat, the cane in his hand topped with augmented gold.

I looked around for Harris. He was over in a corner, still in his tweeds, with a woman on each arm. One was naked, or seemed so, but for veils of Virtua color playing over her skin. She might be clothed, with an augmented illusion of bare skin; there was no way to tell without touching her. Perhaps that was the idea. The other woman was clothed, but that, too, might well have been an augmentation. In here, it was not easy to tell. Many of the women were augmented only to take away a few years, or to soften their eyes, to help mask their contempt for their clients; some wore sophisticated fantasies, like the one on Harris's left, with scraps of red and green and silver sliding over her shoulders and back, around her sides, along her arms, between her fingers, as if caressing her.

Incongruously, Harris was sipping a cup of tea. He raised the cup to me, the saucer in his other hand, and the tips of his moustache gave me a little twirl.

I nodded in reply, but even as I did so, something caught at the corner of my eye. A movement, a shape, a distortion in the air—something that should not have been there. I turned to look, but it was gone. Turning on my heel, avoiding the attentions of a woman augmented with mirrored skin, I ran back the way I had come.

In the doorway, I hesitated a moment, looking this way and that along the street. The ocean sighed, rubbing its back against the columns of the bridge; above, Virtua stars shone gently in the dark, making new constellations from old. Some way along the street, the man in the shadowy greatcoat was striding south, in the general direction of Morocco.

There it was again: a movement, a shimmer in the air. And, just as quickly, it was gone. I followed it, over the empty street, to the sea-rail, until I reached the place where it had been. There was nothing there, at least nothing I could see or feel. Then I saw it again, but in a place I could not follow: out above the ocean, suspended in the cold salt air. A moment later, it had vanished once more.

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From behind me, a familiar voice said: "Come on, Montoya. It isn't that bad, surely?"

"Harris?"

"Who else? I saw you running away. I couldn't help but be curious. Did something scare you in the house of fun? Not Dar, I hope? The silver skin takes some getting used to, but it really is worth the effort. Imagine making love to your reflection from a hall of mirrors."

I sighed, looking down at my hands upon the sea-rail. I realized I was trembling.

"I saw something."

Harris said nothing, waiting for me to continue.

"Something in the air. Something . . . wrong. I can't describe it. I think it was one of the Invisibles."

"Pshaw," he said, or something like it; but it did not sound convincing. Then he asked, in a voice that left me in no doubt that he knew exactly what I had seen: "Where was it?"

"Inside. I followed it out here, across the street. Then I saw it over the sea, just floating in the air."

"And then it was gone?"

I nodded.

I thought I knew what to call it. The girl, Anila, had asked me mockingly whether I had ever seen one of the Invisibles. Now I could tell her I had. I only wished I knew what it was, what it meant.

Harris's face was empty of all expression, as if the emotion had been poured out of him. He was searching the horizon, slowly, with eyes like stones. He seemed to have forgotten that I was there at all. A moment later, he saw it, that brief shimmer in the air, and the sight of it froze him.

"Harris?"

But Harris was running, now, away from me, along the waterfront, his footsteps rapping on the stone; and, as I watched, the shimmer in the air came to life, swooping after him, a writhing nothingness, soundless and strange. It sped past me, very close, and I did not even feel its passing.

Then Harris fell. I saw him trip, and stumble to the ground. I could still hear his footsteps, though; and then I realized he was still running, faster than before. Yet I had seen him fall. I could still see him, stretched out unmoving on the ground. The shimmer flew over him, chasing the other Harris, the one who was still running.

The other Harris glanced over his shoulder. He turned, facing the thing that hunted him, leaning on the sea-rail as if exhausted.

Then, with a grin, he vaulted over the side.

I staggered forward with a wordless cry, leaning over the rail to see him plunging down toward the sea. He was still running as he fell, his legs pumping the air; and I could have sworn that it was working, that he was actually moving further away from the bridge. The shimmer in the air was closing on him now. I stood and watched, helpless, as they were lost from sight: Harris plunging into the ocean, the shimmer vanishing into the waves along with him. I was not sure whether it had reached him before the water claimed them both.

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Suddenly weak, I knelt down on the stone, one hand still clasping the sea-rail.

Up ahead of me, Harris's body still lay, unmoving, on the ground.

He was very different without his augmentations, more so than I would have thought. He was much thinner, for one thing. Very few people used their augmentations to make them look fatter. He was clean-shaven. His clothes were not tweed at all, of course—he was dressed in blue jeans and a simple white shirt, reminding me at once of Anila. It might have been coincidence; but it seemed almost to be a uniform.

He was alive, and not obviously injured, but his breathing was ragged and his skin was very pale. Then again, I had no idea how pale his skin was supposed to be. The skin I remembered had always been an augmentation.

Reluctant to carry him back into the brothel, I called Hassan to come and pick us up. Then I summoned a Virtua medic, who told me there was no lasting damage, and could not even understand why Harris was unconscious. It was certainly not a blow to the head: the medic's diagnostics believed he was sleeping. I sent it away, wondering whether I should call for a human doctor; but the medic seemed to have been right. By the time Hassan arrived, the Englishman was already starting to come round.

Back at the café, the first sip of one of Hassan's coffees seemed to revive Harris completely—he even asked if he could have tea instead, then quickly dropped the request when he saw the affronted look on Hassan's face. He smiled at me and sipped away, having obviously decided to take his time before giving us an explanation. He even produced a small pack of cigarillos, and toyed with one, though he did not light it.

The night had finally quenched the last lingering warmth of the sun, and, outside, a chill sea wind had picked up. Harris tipped back his head to listen to the low, breathy keening that was the wind's lament. Then, ignoring us completely, he sipped at his coffee again.

By the third sip, my patience had expired.

"What the hell happened back there?"

Harris gave me a pained look. "What did you see?"

"I think I saw one of the Invisibles. And now that I've seen one, I still have no idea what they are. I saw it come after you, and I saw you run. I saw you fall. And I saw your augmentation—no, I saw the full set of your augmentations, auditory as well as visual—go running on without you."

He nodded, unsurprised. "Did it get away?"

I shrugged. "It went over the side, down into the sea. The Invisible followed it down. I couldn't see what happened after that."

He nodded again, slowly and infuriatingly. Then: "I suppose an explanation is in order."

Behind me, Hassan snorted; on the other side of the room, I saw that Leila was smiling. I couldn't help but smile myself, at the enormity of the understatement.

"Yes, Harris, an explanation is in order."

"I've a feeling I don't know the half of it myself. But I'll tell you what I know."

"Fine. You can start with the augmentation."

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He nodded, sadly. "The arrangement was a little unorthodox. My set of augmentations was more than just a suit of clothes."

I stared at him. "A Ghost."

He gave a half-shrug, then frowned. "If you want to call it that. A Virtua intelligence that wanted to experience our world—directly, at first hand—and to interact with it. And it wanted all of that, without the chains, the restrictions that would be placed on it if it applied for any of the existing manifestation rights."

I glanced at Leila, who was pretending to study the abstract pattern of one of Hassan's Virtua murals, but listening intently. "So, a Ghost," I repeated.

"As I said: if you want to call it that. It was at least second or third generation, highly intelligent, heuristically intelligent. It knew perfectly well that if it manifested without authorization, it would be hunted down. The Ghost hunters would track it, cage it, and hand it over to the authorities. It would be data-stripped—in human terms, tortured and mutilated—and it might even be erased."

Hassan was nodding, grinning, impressed. "So it found the perfect camouflage."

"Yes. If it manifested itself alone, it would easily be found. But if it wrapped itself around a human, if it arranged the necessary licenses that way, it would never be noticed. It would be taken for a particularly high-level augmentation."

I nodded. "And that's exactly what happened. For years. If I was fooled, then the disguise must have been well-nigh perfect. But having to rely on a human, to stay with that human all the time—that's more or less equivalent to the restrictions it would have had to have had anyway."

"Not really. It was no one's servant. If anything, it was the other way round. I chose the augmentation, but all my actions, everything I did, was on behalf of the AI. I was its agent, its factor, and its bearer. When it wanted to go to the house of fun, I was more than that. . . . It was all for the money, of course. The AI couldn't pay me in Dirham-Pesetas, but Virtua Dollars are good in most places these days."

He fell silent, and we sat listening to the wind, and to the faraway sound of the sea, a soft, low hiss, like static. I had to remind myself that this was the man whose preferred augmentation was a caricature of a middle-aged English gent. Beneath it, he was young, his eyes tired but bright, his movements quick and nervous. Even his voice had changed—of course, whenever I had spoken to him, it had always been the AI speaking back, through the Virtua audio net. Anyone not wired in would have heard only silence.

I wondered how much of Harris's character was his, and how much was shaped by the AI. Now that it was gone, he seemed unfinished somehow, as if far more than his clothes had been taken from him.

Now I understood his fall, out on the road, and why he had been unharmed by it. He had not tripped. The AI had abandoned him, and he had lost consciousness from the shock of being jacked out so suddenly. Nothing more than that.

"All right," I said after a while. "What about the girl? Why did it want me to find her? Is she a . . . a Ghost-bearer, like you, or is she something else?"

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"I don't know."

"And the Invisible? Why was it chasing you? And more to the point, what the hell was it?"

"I don't know. I tell you, I don't know."

After a time, I believed him. The AI had told him what it needed him to know, no more and no less. He knew nothing about the girl. He knew nothing about the Invisible, if that was what it was. He knew very little about the AI's dealings in general.

What was most immediately worrying was that he did not know why the AI should have wanted to help me with my little vice. True, it had demanded payment to temporarily interfere with my visual cortex, to allow me to walk in Virtua without the distractions of the real world. But from what Harris said, it seemed the thing had no need of funds. It must have had some ulterior motive in restricting my visual input to Virtua, for a few hours, every few days. Maybe there was something in Virtua it wanted me to see. I could not imagine what that might be, though, and Harris had no idea.

I struggled with that for a while, but could get no hold on it, and so I turned my attention to an easier problem: the brothel. I did not believe the AI wanted to go there solely for the pleasures of the flesh. It couldn't really experience them, in any case, having no tactile existence; and purely intellectual curiosity only went so far, even for an AI.

It followed, then, that it went there for some other reason, probably to meet someone, maybe more than one person, maybe many. At first, I thought that these people must be humans: if they were other AIs, it could easily communicate with them in Virtua over any distance it liked. On the other hand, if it wanted a really secure exchange of information, the safest way to do that was by actually meeting. Harris swore that he had never overheard anything unexpected at the brothel. But there was no reason he should. After all, I had never overheard my bio-implant talking to El Puente's Ghostmakers.

The only way to know was to go there.

When I arrived at what Harris referred to as the "house of fun," the sun was rising, a smudge of light in the east. On the other side of the bridge, the night still clung to the ocean.

I reflected, again, how ordinary the building was, plain and unadorned; but now I realized that its very lack of augmentation made it stand out. It was possibly the only building on the whole of El Puente without any elements imported from Virtua. A deliberate irony, perhaps, on the part of the AIs who were using it as a clandestine meeting-place.

A figure was sitting on the steps, a figure in a white shirt and blue jeans, watching me, waiting for me. A figure with no augmentations that I could see or sense. Her mouth formed a crooked half-smile as I drew closer, and she said again the last words she had spoken to me.

"Tell me, Señor Montoya: you're the blind man. Have you ever seen the Invisibles?"

I shrugged in reply, and she nodded, as if she had been expecting the gesture.

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"There are things I need to know," I told her. "It seems you already know the questions I want to ask. Can you give me any answers?"

Anila shook her head, slowly. The half-smile was gone now, replaced by a look I knew. The look of one for whom fear has become a friend. The look of the hunted; and the look of the haunted.

"Then can you tell me where to ask?"

"Dar," she said, quietly. "You need to speak to Dar."

"The lady with the mirrored skin. Where is she? Inside?"

The smile returned. "In a way. Wait. I'll bring her to you."

But she made no move to go and fetch Dar. Instead she hung her head, as if suddenly ashamed. When she raised it again, it was to whisper to me, once more, something she had said to me before. "Do I look too ordinary? Not enough decoration?"

Then she began to change.

The process must have been almost instantaneous, as soon as she was wired in. The change took place relatively slowly, though, over eons of Virtua time. The girl's body began to shimmer, then seemed to swell, her skinny figure filling out inside her clothes, her hair lengthening and gaining volume. Her face altered, gaining a few years as it changed. And her skin was turning silver, reflecting the electric blue of the chill dawn sky.

I had not realized before that Dar's eyes were also mirrored. When she blinked, it was like a ripple moving across a still pool of mercury. With those eyes she stared at me, challenging, warning, waiting. Trying to meet that stare, I found myself staring at my own distorted features.

"I'm impressed," I said.

She opened a palm, and it seemed filled with a handful of sky.

"It's simple enough. No harder than being invisible, for example. It requires fast processing, of course; large amounts of visual data have to be updated a number of times a second, but it's nothing beyond the reach of any good system."

"You're an AI. Like the AI that Harris was bearing."

She said nothing, waiting for me to continue.

"You're something new. A Ghost with an alibi."

She smiled at that, silver lips pulling back to reveal silver teeth. "Montoya, it doesn't matter how much you've found out, or deduced, or guessed. You brought the Invisibles to us. It doesn't even matter whether or not you were aware of it. We can't allow them to interfere with our plans now."

"And what are your plans?"

She laughed now, shaking her head. Instead of answering my question, she said: "It's funny that you should have noticed Anila. You thought it unusual that she should have no augmentations. You wondered why that could be. But what about you, Montoya? You have your diagnostics, your messenger, your pathfinder, all useful toys. But no augmentations on display—very unusual, on El Puente. In a way, you're an Invisible yourself. I wonder what the reason might be."

I sensed a presence behind me, and turned to find a group of Ghosts at my back. The AI who had been borne by Harris was one. To my surprise, Leila was another.

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I moved to activate my Ghostbane, and to call for help, but before I could do either of those things, Leila stepped forward, calmly, and took my arm. Her grip was ferociously strong, her touch cold as the deep sea. She smiled at me.

Then everything dissolved, and for a time I was gone.

Maybe Kirsten had tried to explain it to me, but I had never understood. I had never wanted to understand. When she finally left, we had said our good-byes coldly and quickly, an unpleasant duty done with bad grace. Without my knowing, she slipped a parting gift into my pocket: a cowrie shell, smooth and black as jet. I wore it on a chain, its cold teeth blunt against my skin.

Her body was put on ice, a legal requirement, though she swore she would never return to it.

Months passed before I realized that I wanted to find her, and months more before I found the courage to go searching. I guessed and hoped that she might be found on El Puente, where the wall dividing the real world from Virtua seemed to be cracking, crumbling.

I went to a series of back-street operators who could let me walk in Virtua. It was a dangerous game. You never know when someone's hand might slip, or what might happen if it does; and so I lost my sight, for a time. I was lost in darkness; then I was trapped in Virtua, because my new bio-implant had grown faster than my optic nerve had healed.

Afterward, I took the cowrie shell to Medside and hurled it into the sea.

I became a Ghost hunter, and told myself that I had given up searching for Kirsten. I almost believed it.

A touch upon my arm woke me. I opened my eyes and looked up into an empty blue sky.

Leila was kneeling over me. It was her hand I could feel on my arm. The weight of it. The heat of it, no longer cold but blood-warm. With a gasp, I put my own hand on top of hers. It seemed real. It was real. She smiled, then pulled away.

"I am sorry," she told me, softly.

I dragged myself upright, but was not yet ready to stand up. Instead I sat with my back to the sea-rail, and looked from one Ghost to the next.

"It had to be done, Montoya," said the one I still thought of as Harris.

I shook my head, not understanding. "What? What had to be done?"

Another Ghost spoke, a man in a top hat and a greatcoat, a gold-headed cane in his hand. "We had to find a way to evade the hunters. This was the logical way. You said it yourself. Anyone can tell a Ghost by grabbing hold of their arm: if there's nothing there, you've caught your Ghost."

"But I shouldn't be able to touch you. You aren't real. You're just projections, patterns in the Virtua matrix."

Leila said: "You shouldn't be able to see us, either, or hear us. You can only do so through your bio-implant."

I closed my eyes, understanding, and heard Harris's voice again. "Each time you came to me, each time I let you walk in Virtua, I had a chance to alter your bio-implant. You were already wired up for the illusion of sight,

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and the illusion of sound. Why not touch, and taste, and smell? Why not adjust your muscular controls to respond to us as if we were solid? Your altered implant was almost ready at our last meeting. Now it's done."

I felt as if I were falling. I felt a hand on my shoulder, steadying me, reassuring me. The hand of a Ghost.

I sensed the Ghosts moving away, all but one, even though I knew that sense was an illusion. The hand remained on my shoulder. I could hear the Ghost's movements, its breathing. I could smell a soft perfume, and a trace of soap and sweat beneath it. The scent was oddly familiar. The Ghost put its arms around me, and whispered to me, telling me not to be afraid.

I knew the scent. I knew the touch. I knew the voice. It was the voice of the girl, Anila. It was the voice of Dar, the silver-skinned woman. And it was the voice of a woman I had given up searching for.

"Kirsten?"

"Yes."

Irrationally, I was afraid to open my eyes. In case she vanished. Even though I knew she was not there at all.

"Look at me," she said. "You can't hide by closing your eyes. You can't see me now because your bio-implant agrees that you shouldn't. But I could make you see me, if I wanted."

I opened my eyes. Kirsten pulled away from me, to sit beside me against the sea-rail. She looked just as I remembered her. She took my hand—I felt her fingers close around mine, my muscles moving as she brought my hand to rest between both of hers. A breeze rose from the sea below, and a strand of hair blew across her face.

Then she looked at me again, and her smile faded. She reached for a stone on the ground, and tried to pick it up. Her fingers passed through it.

"I'm not real," she said. "Only as real as I can be. I can make myself real, to you, and to anyone else with an altered bio-implant. But I'll never be able to lift that stone."

I said nothing, but picked up the stone myself—perhaps to reassure myself that I was still real—and threw it down again.

Kirsten cupped her hands, and a stone appeared there, an exact copy of the stone she had been unable to grasp. She tossed it to me, and I caught it. It was hard, and rough, and cold; I felt the weight of it in my hand; when I tossed it and caught it, I heard it slap against my skin. Then Kirsten touched it with the tip of her finger, and it vanished.

"Real enough," she whispered.

I took her hand again, and nodded; but even as I did so I sensed something behind us, something hovering above the ocean. I turned, and something caught at the corner of my eye: a shimmer, a distortion in the air. I pulled Kirsten to her feet, and ran.

There was no one on the street. We fled along the empty road, the light of dawn still scraping the world's edge, the laughter of the sea rising about us. The Invisible at our back followed, in silence; sometimes, when I risked a glance over my shoulder, I saw it there; sometimes I saw nothing, but I had no doubt it was still pursuing us.

We came to the entrance to one of the stairwells, and here Kirsten stopped, pushing me back against the stone.

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"It doesn't want you," she hissed.

I tried to speak, but no words could find a way between my gasping breaths.

"I'll find you," she said. Then she kissed me, and was gone, sprinting along by the sea-rail. I leaned back, still breathing hard, my hands trembling on the cold stone, and watched her go. Moments later, I saw something shimmer and vanish in the air before me. The Invisible. As Kirsten had said, the thing, whatever it was, had no interest in me.

I followed, desperate to see Kirsten escape to safety. But as I watched, the Invisible closed in on her. As soon as it touched her, she changed, the shape of Kirsten melting before my eyes. The glimmering veil of the Invisible surrounded her, and now I saw her as Anila, as Dar, as Kirsten again, as combinations of all three.

Then she was gone.

I ran to the spot where she had been, and fell to my knees, searching for some trace of her. There was nothing, not even her scent. I covered my head with my hands, and remained like that for a long time.

I did not return to the café until evening. The central street was crowded, as usual, with cars and camels, tourists and thieves, motorbikes and merchants and mystics. One man had augmented his skin with tattoos, which became animated at a touch, and fought each other for position on his body. Two days before, I would have been quietly impressed. Now I no longer cared.

I smelled Hassan's coffee even before I saw the café. I could not hear his voice, though. He had left his son in charge again. I waved to the boy as I ducked beneath the whitewashed arch that led to Hassan's private rooms. He gave me a look in reply that I could not read.

I understood the look only when I saw Hassan. He was sitting on a cushion, his eyes wet with tears; and beneath his hand, lying back as if in sleep, was Leila. Her eyes were closed, but she was breathing, and now and then she shifted and murmured in her sleep. Hassan was stroking her hair, entwining it between his fingers. So his implant, too, had been altered.

"Montoya," he whispered, and then shook his head, unable to find words.

Patting him on the shoulder, I took a small mirror from a nearby table and held it to Leila's lips. I felt the warmth of her breath on my hand, but no mist appeared in the glass. I do not think that Hassan even noticed what I had done.

I left him, then; left the café, and the central street, and crossed to the sea-rail. The sun was melting into the water, the colors of the sunset augmented as usual. I almost wished I could shut it out, be rid of my implant and see the world without its Virtua augmentations; but I knew I would not dare. It would only be another kind of blindness.

From my pocket I took a small, black, shiny object. A cowrie shell.

It had not been there before. It had not been there when Kirsten found me; it had not been there when the Invisible had caught her. It had appeared later.

That morning, as I sat curled up around my misery on the seafront, I

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had realized that the Invisible was still there. It hung in the air beyond the sea-rail, just out of reach, waiting. I raised my head and cursed it, weeping. It did not respond, only waited until I fell silent once more.

Then it moved toward me, until it seemed near enough to touch. I stared at it, blinking, new thoughts taking shape in my mind. I did not know whether the thoughts were my own, or if the Invisible was feeding them to me somehow, subliminally, through my bio-implant. At the time, it hardly mattered.

There was no reason to believe that Kirsten was gone forever. I had seen the Invisible pursuing the Harris AI, and it must have caught him; yet the next day I had seen him again. It only destroyed their manifestations when it caught them. Their essential data remained unchanged. The same would be true of Kirsten.

So she could return again. "I'll find you," she had said. But I did not know, would never know, whether it was truly her. The Kirsten that had found me was so exactly the Kirsten of my memory—too exactly. I did not know how, and did not like to think of it. While the Ghosts were altering my bio-implant, they could have ransacked my mind for memories of Kirsten. They could take whatever form they wished; and, like Hassan, I had been only too willing to believe. I would have helped them cross over from Virtua, happily, if I could have Kirsten again. And, like the Englishman, I would have become something like a Ghost-bearer.

The Invisible moved closer still, until it enveloped me, holding me completely. I began to understand something of what it was. A Virtua being, like the Ghosts, but of a higher order. One that had no such childish longing for corporeality. It had left that behind long ago. Yet it bore no animosity toward the Ghosts, either. It had little interest in them at all.

Why, then, had it interfered, tearing apart the representations of Harris, and of Kirsten?

My unspoken question was met only with silence. Then the Invisible moved away, over the sea, and was gone.

After a while, I realized there was something in my hand. Puzzled, I looked at it, and realized that this was the Invisible's answer.

Now, as the evening drew in, I held the cowrie shell in my hand again, watching the play of light on its smooth, hard surface. I held it tight, trying to crush it, but it would not break. The heat of my skin lingered on its surface for a while; then it cooled again. Like a real shell.

Yet, when I blew upon it, a flame sprang up, a blue flame with a greenish halo, a Virtua flame, a flame that did not burn. I blew on it again, and the flame was gone.

The Invisible had vanished before I worked out what it was—what Kirsten had become. I do not know what I would have done if I had understood in time. Perhaps I would have agreed to join her, and leave my body behind. Perhaps she no longer wanted me to, and had only helped me because of a distant memory.

Standing at the sea-rail, somewhere between Spain and Morocco, I blew on the shell once more, bringing the flame to life. A tear grew from the corner of my eye, and splashed into my hand, over the shell. The teardrop was beautiful, and real, but could not douse the flame. O

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Steven Utley returns to our pages with his sixteenth Silurian Tale. In his latest story, the author of *This Impatient Ape* (1998) and *Career Moves of the Gods* (2000), shows us the sorrow of being an . . .

EXILE

Steven Utley

I.

Mornings are not good. Anxious? Hell yes I'm anxious. I always am anxious at the start of the day. Matutinal anxiety is par for the course, dependable as sunrise. Out in the world, even in the little I see of the world nowadays, there are usually distractions. When there aren't I can always mask anxiety with attitude, if nothing else hide it behind the new beard. But it shares my bed faithfully. I can't say with complete accuracy that I have nightmares because any more I never remember my dreams, good or bad, which is just as well because every morning I feel unmistakably that they must have been very bad ones indeed, full of dread, menace. Anyway: morning. The clock has told me to rise and shine. I hate cute clocks and curse the day man became the ape that keeps track of time. All the same, have to get up, get to work, achieve those goals, meet those schedules, so I greet the new day, latest in a series, going to collect the whole set eventually. Look like a total jerk in the bathroom mirror, feel like one in person, wonder as I shave shit shower how the other total jerk of my acquaintance sleeps these days. Good morning, Wortham, wherever the hell you are. Another day another doughnut.

The anxiety generally has begun to recede into the background by the time I arrive at work, and even on mornings when it doesn't do so of its own accord there's the jump station's ozone tang to take a body's mind off its troubles. Goes up the nose like an icepick. Talk about bracing, and the joke is that it protects the sinuses against deadly ultraviolet radiation. The old hands say you get used to it in time. Certainly, if you work at the jump station you have the time, your pick (in theory) of one of three shifts, each as grueling as the other two. The station operates around the clock and somebody's making a killing. Takes a lot of food, fuel, and sundries to keep the expedition going. And water, tons of it. Potable water is at a premium in Paleozoic time. Even allowing for the truckloads of purification tablets that go in, and those disposable straws that filter and purify water as you drink through them, the arithmetic of H_20 comes down to the indefeasible minimal requirement of six gallons per person per day times the number of persons requiring those six gallons per day.

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That number has fluctuated over time but it's never dropped below a thousand since the eoan phase of the expedition. And though the U.S. Navy provides the expedition's official support force, the U.S. Army is sending in a welldrilling unit. Must be getting crowded back in Paleozoic time.

Jump station techs work like dogs. Everybody else works like a pit pony. The pace never lets up, mustn't disrupt the holy schedule. If it's not *X* volume of supplies going in, it's *Y* number of containerized specimens coming out. Of course, people go in and come out, too, VIPs, SIPs, and even NIPs, Very, Self-, or Not Important Persons as the case may be. If I could go in I'd be a NIP, but even if I had to be a NIP I'd go in. Not that I am not already a NIP. Not that I ever will go in.

First thing this morning a SIP wants to cut in line, his time being more valuable than anybody else's. The boss tech goes into patented It Simply Can't Be Done mode while the subsidiary techs make bets among themselves, will the jerk whine or cajole, threaten or pout? For my own part, watching such exchanges makes me embarrassed ever to have been a member of the fraternity and glad for the moment that I am a member no longer. With a helpless shrug and a regretful tone, the boss tech explains, "Folks on the other end have schedules and quotas, too, you see, and everything on both sides is so carefully synchronized that any deviation will throw the whole operation out of whack." This particular Particularly SIP is not one to be so easily dissuaded. "I'm just asking for a *little* flexibility." A little or a lot, flexibility is out of the question. The boss tech ceases to be at all regretful and falls back on the fact that in the jump station itself he outranks everybody, even the prep team, and is more important than any other species of IP. He is TIP, *The* IP.

I am not a tech myself but a peripheral sort of jump station regular, employed by one of the contractors who handle incoming and outgoing cargo. I've had better jobs, better bosses, but worse ones, too. Not naming any names.

II.

By midshift I'm tired but wired and knock off for lunch. On my way out I tell Doris, the youngest tech and the only one I talk to regularly, "I sure am glad I don't have to do this for a living." She grins and nods sympathetically. "Sometimes I wish," she says, "I got paid for subjective time." I bring my lunch from home every day and eat it out of its tube as I walk over to the marine museum, where I can digest in peace while admiring the featured permanent exhibit, The PaleoAquarium.

In my teens the prospects arising from the discovery of the so called anomaly set my imagination afire; I knew then that there was simply no other point in spacetime I'd rather occupy than the midPaleozoic SiluroDevonian boundary, 408 M.Y.B.P., give or take a leap year. Later, as a dweeby twentysomething college graduate aspiring to become a full-fledged scientist and equipped with what I imagined to be useful skills, I tried to convince the right people (though ultimately it came down to try-

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ing to convince the right person) that I would be an invaluable addition to the expedition. For "an invaluable addition" read "willing and able to do any amount of dirty work."

Dreams don't come with guarantees. My current job is the best I could get that has any connection whatever with the expedition, the only way I now have of participating in it, but the connection is barely firm enough to support the last shreds of a fellow's pride. I'll never get to go into the anomaly; I'll never get any closer to any part of the Paleozoic world than I am at the PaleoAquarium.

If I am ever actually happy any more it's in the company of trilobites, cephalopods, eurypterids, and armored fish sent back by members of the expedition. First thing, I pass by all the tanks, check to see, among other things, almost as if it were any of my business, if the eurypterid has devoured her offspring again. I've spent so much time with these creatures that I can pick out individuals though I'm not so far gone that I've given them pet names. When I am that far gone I'll stick to the classics. Spot, Stripe, Fluffy. I think Toughy would be a good name for a sea scorpion. I like to watch people at The PaleoAquarium, too, though sometimes it's just gradeschoolkids running around screaming and paying as little attention as possible to the adults in attendance or to anything else beyond their monkey need to run around screaming. Makes you wonder why it never occurred to their mothers to devour them. But one time a loonie dropped by to expose himself to sundry and all, vertebrates and invertebrates alike. Another time a different loonie tried to heave a brick through the glass front of the trilobite tank.

First up today is a small pack of boys in their midteens. Because they communicate among themselves by means of piercing wordless vocalizations I can only speculate that the local VR arcade has burned down and they have repaired to the museum for the purpose of mourning their terrible loss. At least they arrive all broken out in frowns and scowls as well as pimples but soon they buck up and begin showing off for each other and the adoring public, which is to say, me. One kid with luteous hair, disregarding a printed notice that specifically enjoins visitors not to do so, leans far over the rail, raps his knuckles against the eurypterid tank, grins over his shoulder at his chums. They note his daring with approval. The eurypterid (*E. remipes*) pays no attention whatever. I often wonder if anything goes on in its dim arthropod brain; is it remotely aware of the strange creatures inhabiting the strange world on the other side of the glass. Probably if it thinks at all it thinks along the lines of *Hungry, better spawn again soon*. I watch hoping against hope to see the rail give under the kid's weight and him precipitate face first against and perhaps through the tank's glass front. Having a relatively large chordate crash headlong into its tank would undoubtedly enliven *E. remipes*' day, perhaps even generate a philosophical spark, a notion it could pass on to the next generation of little sea scorpions before it gobbled them down: *Beyond the walls of our world, my children, are other realms, other planes of being*.

As the boys move off mouthing shrilly amongst themselves two of their postadolescent selves, Lem and Clem or maybe it's Fred and Red or Lonnie and Donnie, cut through to the snack bar from the construction site on

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the other side of the museum. Working outside as they do in an ozonefree environment they're the color of bricks wherever sunlight has touched skin. Some lucky fellow, I think, has melanoma in his future. Passing the eurypterid tank Leroy nudges Elroy and says, "God*damn,* that is the ugliest lobster I ever saw," and Elroy says, "How'd ya like to go giggin' for something like that?" and both laugh. That thing could gig right back, I think as I watch their retreating beefy backsides, that spike on its tail isn't a decoration.

Mommy and Daddy arrive with Child in tow. My daily visit to The PaleoAquarium wouldn't be complete if I did not get to observe these common and yet fascinating creatures. Today's specimens are large florid lostlooking ovoids. Clearly this is not the place where the cute dolphins leap through hoops. As they wobble to a stop in front of a tankful of mudsucking armored fish about as long as your hand I note that Child is pouting and Mommy is patently exasperated with the fruit of her lardy loins. Daddy alone takes notice of the diminutive sea monsters of the Upper Silurian and being momentarily distracted from the business of getting his bearings touches the button. TellAll gives him a carefully modulated earful about his finny forebears that causes him to talk back and tell it a thing or two, from which I am able to infer that he most emphatically does not believe human beings are descended from fish and are themselves in fact rather highly specialized fish. Mommy clearly shares his disbelief because she hugs both Child and handbag to her midriff in the sudden conviction that this wicked place into which she and hers have innocently wandered must harbor not only evolutionists but pederasts and cutpurses as well. The nuclear family of rather highly specialized fish beats a waddling retreat. The sole remaining rather highly specialized fish checks his watch and departs in pursuit of his separate destiny.

III.

Back on the job I get an unpleasant but not an altogether unexpected jolt. I understood the risk I was taking when I applied to work here. Yet a tickly chill runs down my back like a drop of ice water when I realize that someone has noticed and almost but not quite recognized me, a woman waiting with her party to be taken in hand by the prep team.

Not that I let on. I've learned how not to let on about anything to anybody. As far as she can tell I'm unaware of her existence or else regard her as but one more object waiting its turn to go in. And she's just not *sure*. I shave my head nowadays and have grown a beard by way of compensation and, too, I never got nearly as many media minutes as Wortham. It had been *his* project. When, so to speak, the villagers had caught on to strange doings up at Castle Frankenstein and stormed the place they were much more interested in the mad scientist than in his feeble-minded assistant. Not that they didn't bring enough rope to hang both. (No. No, it wasn't noisy and melodramatic, no lynch mob broke down the door, we didn't even get tarred and feathered. But in the scientific community an *exposé* in *Nature* is next best to a noose around the neck.)

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Nevertheless this person, thinking she knows me from somewhere, flat out stares. Typical semisocialized paleo geek(ette) going for her doctorate, badskinned, not too cleanlooking, clad in multipocketed workshirt over T-shirt and jeans tucked into desert boots, the number five or *maybe* number four person on a team comprising six people. It'll probably come to her, I think, while she's doing whatever she's going to be doing in Paleozoic time. She'll stop sorting her trilobites and look thoughtfully at her colleagues and say, "You know who I think that guy at the jump station was, the bald one with the beard?" And probably one of her colleagues will reply, "He's got some goddamn nerve. You'd think he'd be too ashamed to show his face anywhere near *scientists*." And maybe another will say, "Naw, couldn't have been him, he'd have to have some goddamn nerve. It'd be like Public Enemy Number Two standing around in front of the police station hoping nobody noticed him."

Wortham, of course, being Public Enemy Number One. With all his media minutes she would have recognized him instantly.

The prep team comes out of the jump station, tells the paleo team it's time, and everyone troops by me. The paleo girl shoots me a last look and her lips part slightly and I know she's dying to ask. I glare back in pure childish defiant hatred.

Well, so it's childish. I'd had my heart set on joining the expedition ever since my early teens. If at the time I had instead been a twentysomething college graduate with useful skills I just might've convinced the right people that I'd be an invaluable addition to the expedition. Would've been fairly easy in the early days when research grants practically fell off trees and the NSF had all it could do to keep the various research teams from trampling one another in their haste to get into Paleozoic time. At the peak of activity two or maybe three thousand people must've been in Paleozoic time, every type of scientist plus a sizable support force of Navy personnel, also curious wellheeled wellconnected civilian laypersons. They established permanent camps, built power stations and radio telescopes, launched satellites, all the comforts of home, didn't matter who you were or where, off in darkest coldest Gondwana you could still get your microwave infodump every hour on the hour. There'd have been a place for me. I might never have met Wortham, let alone hooked up with him.

It cost money, of course, and as often happens money became increasingly hard to get as the public grew bored and mostly forgot that there was an expedition. I had my dreams but dreams don't come with guarantees. I cast about for other suitable work and found it. Or it found me. The Devil came in the guise of Wortham and spake unto me, saying, "The line of people waiting to go to the Paleozoic era is very long and moves very slowly, and very obscure researchers such as we are at the very back of it. Shall we wait patiently and work and hope throughout the years or perhaps even decades to come, all the while watching and eating our hearts out as others advance and get the glory and the grants, or *shall we cut in line?*"

And I should have rebuked him, saying, "Get thee behind me, Satan," but I didn't because even the Devil can tell the truth when it suits his purposes. The line ahead of us was very long and—

There I go, dramatizing again. Wortham never misled me, cast no spell

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over me; I did myself in. It was his idea and his project but I helped. I always knew what we were doing and why: *advancement*. I just don't know, I can't imagine anymore, what I thought I was doing, what the hell I thought I was thinking.

Now Wortham's, I don't know, a cab driver somewhere, a clerk in a pet store or a night watchman, or he's gone and got himself lost in the dozen or so acres that remain of the Amazon rainforest. And I, now I am the stock boy at the jump station.

IV.

Shift ends and it's home again home again. Pop the plastic off an Eat-Me™. Pay just enough attention to the usual top stories in the evening news, wars whores scores bores, so I can sound informed on current affairs at work tomorrow. Everything revolves around work. Peel off clothes, wash face, stretch out on the bed, dead tired but dreading sleep, because every morning I awaken with a full sense of my sins having been found out. As is in fact the case: found out, duly noted and filed for future reference. A scientist who fudges his results sooner or later but inevitably gets found out, exposed, and once that's happened he's finished in the scientific community, kaput. Say goodbye to titles, so long to the international conferences, oh, and tenure? Forget tenure. Worse, any good work an errant scientist ever has ever done is suddenly under suspicion. Oh, and this goes for aspiring scientists, too.

Thus I am not consorting with my peers in Paleozoic time and not doing brilliant work in my chosen field or in anyone else's for that matter. Instead I'm working at the only job I could get, After The Fall, that pertains in any way to the one great thing that gave my life meaning. I fill out invoices for food toothpaste toilet paper pencils sunscreen salt tablets rubber bands a thousand and one other items. I move cartloads of supplies into the jump station and see them off to the busy folks in Paleozoic time. I have some goddamn nerve all right.

It's like the old joke about the man who cleans up after the elephants in a circus. Somebody asks him how he likes his job, he says the hours are awful, the working conditions are terrible, the pay is lousy. All he does the livelong day is shovel elephant shit. The other person asks him why he doesn't get a better job someplace else. "What," he exclaims, "and give up show business?" ○

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BENJAMIN THE UNBELIEVER

Allen M. Steele

"Benjamin the Unbeliever" is the second installment in the second series of Coyote stories. It follows the events of "The Madwoman of Shuttlefield" (May 2003). "The Days Between," the author's beautiful tale from the first series, was a recent Nebula finalist.

Three days after I last saw the prophet alive, a hunting party from Defiance found me at the base of Mt. Shaw: starving, barely conscious, more dead than alive. At least so I'm told; that part of my memory is a blank spot. The hunters fashioned a litter from tree branches, then tied me to it and dragged me back to their hidden settlement. I slept for the next two days, waking up only now and then, often screaming from nightmares that I don't remember.

I went into the wilderness of Midland along with thirty-one people, including their leader, the Reverend Zoltan Shirow. I was the only one who came back out. So far as I know, the rest are dead, including the woman I loved. I tried to save them, but I couldn't. Indeed, perhaps only God could have saved them . . . and if Zoltan is to be believed, then God had His own plans for him.

I begin my story here so you'll know, from the beginning, that it ends in tragedy. This is a dark tale, no two ways around it. Zoltan's disciples were in search of spiritual transformation; I wish I could believe that they achieved this, yet there's no way of knowing, for when the time came for me to stand with them, I fled for my life. My motives were base and self-serving, and yet I'm the only one who survived.

Years have passed since then, but I've never spoken about what happened until now. Not just because what I endured has been too painful to recall, but also because I've had to give myself time to understand what happened. Guilt is a terrible burden, and no one who considers himself to be a decent person should ever have to shoulder the blame for betraying someone he loved.

This is my testament: the final days of Zoltan Shirow, God's messenger

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to Coyote, as told by Ben Harlan, his last remaining follower. Or, as Zoltan liked to call me, Benjamin the Unbeliever.

The prophet fell from the sun on a cold winter morning, his coming heralded not by the trumpets of angels but by the sonic boom of an orbital shuttle. I was standing at the edge of the snow-covered landing field as the spacecraft gently touched down, waiting to unload freight from the starship that had arrived a couple of days earlier. I like to think that, if I had known who was aboard, I might have called in sick, but the truth is that it wouldn't have mattered, because Zoltan probably would have found me anyway. Just as Jesus needed Judas to fulfill his destiny, Zoltan needed me . . . and I needed the job.

Good paying jobs were tough to find in Shuttlefield. I'd been on Coyote for nearly seven months, a little more than a year and a half by Earth reckoning. My ship, the *Long Voyage*—full name, the WHSS *Long Voyage to the Galaxy in the Spirit of Social Collectivism*—was the third Union Astronautica ship to reach 47 Ursae Majoris, following the *Seeking Glorious Destiny Among the Stars for the Greater Good of Social Collectivism* and the *Traveling Forth to Spread Social Collectivism to New Frontiers*. Together, they'd brought three thousand people to Coyote, which doesn't sound like such a high figure until you realize that most of the population was living in poverty, with a privileged few taking up residence in the log cabins built by the original colonists from the URSS *Alabama* before they'd fled into the wilderness.

On the strength of a winning number on a lottery ticket and promises of a better life on the new world, I'd spent forty-eight years in biostasis to get away from the Western Hemisphere Union, only to find that the same people who ran the show back there were also in charge out here. And that's how I found myself huddled in a leaky tent, eating creek-crab stew and wondering how a smart guy like me had been rooked so badly, when the fact of the matter is that I'm not very smart and the system is rigged to take advantage of losers. So screw social collectivism and the horse it rode in on. On second thought, let's eat the horse—if we had one to eat, that is—and let the guys who came up with collectivist theory go screw themselves.

When it was announced, in the first week of Barchiel, c.y. 5, that the fourth Union ship from Earth—the WHSS *Magnificent Journey to the Stars in Search of Social Collectivism*, or the *Magnificent Journey* for short—had entered the system and would soon be making orbit around Coyote, I was the first person in line at the community hall in Liberty for the job of unloading freight from its shuttles. Literally the first; there were nearly three hundred guys behind me, waiting for a Union Guard soldier to open the door and let us in. During the warm seasons, we would have been working on the collective farms, but now it was the middle of Coyote's 274-day winter and jobs were scarce, so I was willing to stand in the cold for three hours just for the chance to schlep cargo containers.

And that's why I was at the landing field in Shuttlefield that morning, stamping my feet in the snow and blowing on my hands, as I watched the gangway come down from the shuttle's belly. The first people off were the

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pilot and co-pilot; perhaps they were expecting a brass band, because they stopped and stared at the dozen or so guys in patched-up parkas who looked as if they hadn't eaten a decent meal in six months. A Guard officer emerged from the crowd, saluted them, murmured a few words, then led them away. Poor bastards—nearly a half-century in space, only to find starving peasants. I felt sorry for them, but envied them even more. As members of *Magnificent Journey*'s flight crew, they'd have the benefit of warm houses and good food before they reboarded the starship to make the long return-flight to Earth. They were just passing through; the rest of us were stuck here.

The passengers came next, a steady parade of men, women, and children, every one of them with the shaved heads and shuffling gait of those who've recently emerged from the dreamless coma of biostasis. Their duffel bags were stuffed with the few belongings they'd been allowed to bring from Earth, their parkas and caps were clean and new, and not one of them had any clue as to where they were or what they'd gotten themselves into. One by one, they stepped off the ramp, squinted against the bright sunlight, looked around in confusion, then followed the person in front of them, who didn't have a clue as to where he or she was going either. Fresh meat for Coyote. I found myself wondering how many of them would make it through their first year. We'd already lost more than forty colonists to hunger, cold, disease, and predators, and the cemetery outside Liberty had room for more.

About thirty people had come down the gangway when there was a pause in the procession. At first, I thought everyone had disembarked, until I remembered that the shuttles had a passenger load of sixty. There had to be more; the shuttles wouldn't fly down half-full. I had just turned to the guy next to me—Jaime Hodge, one of my camp buddies—and was about to say something like *what's the hold-up?* when his eyes widened.

"Holy crap," Jaime murmured. "Would you look at that?"

I looked around to see a figure in a hooded white robe step through the hatch. At first I thought it was a Savant—just what we needed, another goddamn posthuman—but quickly realized I was wrong. For one thing, Savants wore black; for another, there was also a huge bulge on his back, as if he was carrying an oversize pack beneath his robe. He kept his head lowered, so I couldn't see his face.

And right behind him, a long line of men and women, each wearing identical robes. A few had their cowls pulled up, but most had let them fall back on their shoulders; unlike the other passengers, they weren't carrying bags. What really set them apart, though, was an air of implacable calm. No hesitation, no uncertainty; they followed their leader as if they knew exactly where they were going. Some actually smiled. I'd seen all kinds come off the shuttles, but never anything like this.

The first guy stepped off the ramp, stopped, turned around. Everyone behind him halted; they silently watched as he bent over. The shuttle's thrusters had melted away the snow, exposing charred grass and baked mud; he scooped up a fistful of dirt, then he rose and looked at the people behind him. He said something I didn't quite catch—"the promised land" was all I heard—before everyone on the ramp began to yell:

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"Amen!"
"Thank you, Reverend!"
"Hallelujah!"
"Praise the Lord!"
"Oh, yeah. Go tell it on the mountain." Jaime glanced at me. "All we need now, a bunch of . . ."

Then his mouth sagged open, and so did mine, for at that instant the leader opened his robe and let it drop to his feet, and now everyone got their first good look at who—or what—had just come to Coyote.

Two great wings the color of suede leather unfolded from his back. They expanded to full length, revealing serrated tips and delicate ribbing beneath the thin skin. Then he turned, and now his face was revealed. Narrow eyes sunk deep within a skull whose jaw had been enlarged to provide room for a pair of sharp fangs; above his broad mouth, a nose shortened to become a snout. His ears were oversized, slightly pointed at the tips. Like everyone else, his body had been shaved before he had entered biostasis, yet dark stubble was growing back on his barrel chest. His arms were thick and muscular, his hands deformed claws with talons for fingers.

A murmur swept through the crowd as everyone shrank back, yet the gargoyle remained calm. Indeed, it almost seemed as if he was relishing the moment. Then he smiled—benignly, like he was forgiving us—and bowed from the waist, folding his hands together as if in supplication.

"Sorry," he said, his voice oddly mild. "Didn't mean to shock you."

A couple of nervous laughs. He responded with a grin that exposed his fangs once more. "If you think *I'm* weird," he added, cocking a thumb toward the hatch behind him, "wait'll you get a load of the *next* guy."

Revulsion gave way to laughter. "Hey, man!" Jaime yelled. "Can you fly with those things?"

Irritation crossed his face, quickly replaced by a self-deprecating smile. "I don't know," he said. "Let me try."

Motioning for everyone to give him room, he stepped away from his entourage. He bent slightly forward, and now the bat-like wings spread outward to their full span—nearly eight feet, impressive enough to raise a few gasps.

"He's never going to make it," someone murmured. "Air's too thin." And he was right, of course. Coyote's atmospheric pressure at sea level was about the same as that of Denver or Albuquerque back on Earth. Oh, swoops had no trouble flying here, nor did skeeters, or any of the other birds and bugs that had evolved on this world. But a winged man? No way.

If the gargoyle heard this, though, he didn't pay attention. He shut his eyes, scrunched up his face, took a deep breath, held it . . . and the wings flapped feebly, not giving him so much as an inch of lift.

He opened one eye, peered at Jaime. "Am I there yet?" Then he looked down at his feet, saw that they hadn't left the ground. "Aw, shucks . . . all this way for nothing."

Now everyone was whooping it up. It was the funniest thing we'd seen in months . . . and believe me, there wasn't much to laugh about on Coy-

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ote. The batman's followers joined in; they could take a joke. He let the laughter run its course, then he folded his wings and stood erect.

"Now that we've met," he said, speaking loudly enough for all to hear, "let me introduce myself. I'm Zoltan Shirow . . . the Reverend Zoltan Shirow . . . founding pastor of the Church of Universal Transformation. Don't be scared, though . . . we're not looking for donations." That earned a couple of guffaws. "This is my congregation," he continued, gesturing to the people behind him. "We refer to ourselves as Universalists, but if you want, you can call us the guys in the white robes."

A few chuckles. "We're a small, nondenominational sect, and we've come here in search of religious freedom. Like I said, we're not looking for money, nor are we trying to make converts. All we want to do is be able to practice our beliefs in peace."

"What do you mean, universal transformation?" someone from the back of the crowd called out.

"You're pretty much looking at it." That brought some more laughs. "Seriously, though, once we've set up camp, you're all welcome to drop by for a visit. Tell your friends, too. And we'd likewise appreciate any hospitality you could show us . . . this is all new to us, and Lord knows we could use all the help we can get."

He stopped, looked around. "For starters, is there anyone here who could show us where we can put ourselves? No need for anyone to haul anything . . . we can carry our own belongings. Just someone to show us around."

To this day, I don't know why I raised my hand. Perhaps it was because I was charmed by a dude who looked like a bat and spoke like a stand-up comedian. Maybe I was just interested in finding out who these people were. I may have even wanted to see if they had anything I could beg, borrow, or steal. A few others volunteered, too, but Shirow saw me first. Almost at random, he pointed my way.

And that's how it all began. As simple as that.

The Universalists had brought a lot of stuff with them, much more than they would have normally been allowed under Union Astronautica regulations. Their belongings were clearly marked by the stenciled emblem of their sect—a red circle enclosing a white Gaelic cross—along with their individual names. As I watched, each church member claimed at least two bags, and still left several large containers behind in the shuttle's cargo bay. True to Shirow's word, though, they politely declined assistance from anyone who offered to help carry their stuff; two members stayed behind to safeguard the containers until someone came back for them. And so I fell in with the Universalists, and together we walked into town.

It's hard to describe just how awful Shuttlefield was in those days. Adjectives like "stinking," "impoverished," or "filthy" don't quite cut it; "slum" and "hellhole" are good approximations, but they don't get close enough. Bamboo shacks and patched-up tents and faux-birch hovels, arranged in rows along muddy paths pocked with frozen potholes that meandered from one camp to another; communal latrines that reeked of urine and fe-

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ces, the air thick with smoke from trash-can fires; mounds of garbage over which stray dogs and creek-cats vied for what precious little scraps of food could be found in them; prostitutes and hustlers, con-men and drunks, and people like me. The third world reborn on the new world; hell of a way to conquer the universe.

Yet Zoltan Shirow didn't seem to notice any of this. He strode through Shuttlefield as if he was a papal envoy, ignoring the hard-eyed stares of hucksters selling handmade clothes from their kiosks, artfully stepping past whores who tried to offer their services. At first I marched with him, pointing out the location of bathhouses and garbage pits, but he said little or nothing; his dark gaze roved across the town, taking in everything yet never stopping. After a while I found myself unable to keep up with him. Falling back into the ranks of his congregation, I found myself walking alongside a small figure whose hood was still raised.

"Doesn't speak much, does he?" I murmured.

"Oh, no," she replied. "Zoltan likes to talk. He just waits until he has something to say."

Glancing down at her, I found myself gazing into the most beautiful pair of blue-green eyes I'd ever seen. The girl wasn't more than nineteen or twenty, only half my age, and so petite that it seemed as if she would wilt in the cold, yet she carried about her an air of calm that seemed to make her invulnerable to the winter chill. She met my eye, favored me with a delicate smile.

"Just wait," she added. "You'll see."

"That's assuming I hang around long enough." I didn't mean it to sound insulting, but it came out that way.

She let it pass. "You're with us now, aren't you?"

"Well, yeah, but I'm trying to find a place for you to camp." We were near the middle of town. "We're not going to find anything if we keep going this way."

"What about over there?" This from a man walking along behind us; like the girl, his hooded cloak lent him a monkish appearance. He pointed to a small bare spot of ground between two camps. "We could put . . ."

"Oh, no, you don't." I shook my head. "That belongs to the Cutters Guild. And next to them is New Frontiers turf, the people who came on the second ship. Set up here and you're in for a fight."

The girl shook her head. "We don't wish to quarrel with anyone." Then she looked at me again. "What do you mean by turf?"

That led me to trying to explain how things worked in Shuttlefield. You couldn't just pitch a tent anywhere because various guilds, groups, and cliques had already staked out their territory; more likely than not, someone else had already laid claim to the spot you'd chosen. If you insisted on staying, they made sure you paid for the privilege through paying "taxes" or "rent," which were just polite terms for extortion.

"And what do the authorities have to say about this?" she asked. "We were told that there was a local government in place."

"Government?" I couldn't help but laugh out loud. "It's a joke. Shuttlefield's run by the Central Committee . . . Matriarch Hernandez and her crew, Union Astronautica officers from *Glorious Destiny*. We rarely see

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them down here . . . they're all in Liberty. So far as they're concerned, everyone here is just a supply of cheap labor. As long as we don't riot or burn the place down, they don't give a shit how we live."

The girl blanched. "What about the Guard?" she asked. "Aren't they supposed to protect the colony?"

"Look around." I waved a hand across the shanty-town surrounding us. "You think there's law here? I've known guys who've had their throats cut just because they didn't pay their rent on time, and the Guard didn't do . . . um, squat about it. Same for the Proctors . . . the blue-shirts, we call 'em. They work for the Committee, and their main job is making sure the status quo is maintained."

"So why don't you leave?" This from the man walking behind us. "Why stay here if it's so bad?"

I shrugged. "Where would we go?" Before he could answer that, I went on. "New Florida's big enough for another colony, and there's a whole planet that hasn't been explored . . . but once you get outside the perimeter defense system, you're on your own, and there's things out there that'll kill you before you can bat an eye."

"So no one has left?"

"Oh, sure. The original colonists did. That was a long time ago, though, and no one has seen 'em since. Generally speaking, people who come here stay put. Safety in numbers. It ain't much, but at least it's something." I shook my head. "All hail the glories of social collectivism, and all that crap."

A look passed between them. "I take it you don't believe in collectivist theory," the girl said, very quietly.

Back on Earth, publicly criticizing social collectivism could earn you a six-week stay in rehab clinic and temporary loss of citizenship. But Earth was forty-six light-years away; so far as most people in Shuttlefield were concerned, I could have stood on an outhouse roof to proclaim that Karl Marx enjoyed sex with farm animals and no one would have cared. "I'm not a believer, no."

"So what *do* you believe?"

Zoltan Shirow had stopped, turned to look back at me. I'd later learn that there was little that his ears couldn't pick up. For now, though, there was this simple question. Everyone came to a halt; they wanted to hear my answer.

"I . . . I don't believe in anything," I replied, embarrassed by the sudden attention.

"Ah . . . I see." His eyes bored into mine. "Not even God?"

Silence. Even in the frigid cold, I felt an uncomfortable warmth. "I . . . I . . . I don't know."

"So you believe in nothing." Shirow nodded almost sadly. "Pity." Then he turned to look around. "So tell me . . . where should we pitch our tents?"

So far as I could see, there was nowhere these people could set up camp. All the available turf had already been claimed. "There's a few acres just south of here," I said, pointing in the direction I'd been leading them. "That's where everyone from your ship is being put."

"Thank you, but we'd rather have some privacy. Is there any place else?"

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The only vacant area left was out near the swamps where the tall grass hadn't yet been cut down. Sissy Levin and Allegra DiSilvio lived out there, but Sissy was insane and Allegra was a hermit, so people tended to leave them alone. I figured that was as good a place as any for the Church of Universal Transformation.

"Over there," I said. "There's only a couple of people out that way."

Shirow nodded. "Very well, then. That's where we'll go."

"You're going to have a hard time. It hasn't been cleared yet."

"We'll manage. You know why?" I didn't answer, and he smiled. "Because *I* believe in *you*." Then he turned to his followers. "Come on . . . that's where we're going."

As one, without so much as a single word of question, they turned and began to follow Shirow as he marched off in the direction I'd indicated. Astonished, I watched as one white-robed acolyte after another walked past me, heading toward a place I'd picked almost at random. So far as they knew, I could have sent them toward a boid nest, yet they trusted me. . . .

No. They trusted *him*. With absolute, unquestioning faith that what he said was right. I was still staring after them when the girl stopped. She turned, and came back to me. Once again I found myself attracted by those bright green eyes, that air of invulnerability.

"Do you want a better life?" she asked. I nodded dumbly. "Then come along."

"Why?"

"Because I believe in you, too." Then she took my hand and led me away.

The Church of Universal Transformation had come to Coyote well-prepared for life in the wild: thirty-one dome tents complete with their own solar heaters, with room for three in each; brand-new sleeping bags; hand and power tools of all kinds, along with a couple of portable RTF generators to run the electric lamps they strung up around the campsite; a ninety-day supply of freeze-dried vegetarian food; adequate clothing for both winter and summer; pads loaded with a small library of books about wilderness survival, homesteading, and craft-making; medical supplies for nearly every contingency.

All these riches were carefully packed inside the cargo containers; once I showed them the unclaimed marshland outside town, fifteen men went back to the landing field and unloaded them from the shuttle, lugging the crates across Shuttlefield past townspeople who watched with curiosity and envy. When I asked how they'd managed to get around the strict weight limitations imposed by the Union Astronautica, they merely smiled and gave noncommittal answers, and after a while I gave up, figuring that the church had greased a few palms here and there. Compared to the miserable living conditions endured by everyone else in Shuttlefield, the Universalists were ready to live like kings.

Yet they weren't lazy. Far from it; as soon as they had all their gear, they took off their robes, put on parkas, unpacked their tools and went to work. A half-dozen men used scythes and hand-axes to clear away the

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spider-brush and sourgrass, while several more picked up shovels and began digging a firepit and the women erected tents and foraged for wood. Although they weren't yet acclimated to Coyote's thin air, they seldom rested and they never complained; they smiled and laughed as they went about their labors, and when one person needed to take a breather, another person simply picked up where he'd left off.

During all this, the Rev. Shirow walked among them, wearing a wool tunic with long slits on its back through which his wings protruded. Now and then he'd take a few whacks with an axe or lend a hand with a shovel, yet he didn't do much work himself; instead he supervised everyone, instructing them where and how to do their jobs, sometimes pausing to share a few quiet words with one church member or another. Zoltan's private tent was the first to go up, though, and once it was ready for occupancy it wasn't long before he vanished into it. Yet no one seemed to mind; it was if he had the right to excuse himself while his followers busted their asses.

After a little while I found myself joining in. I told myself that I had nothing else worth doing that day, that I'd get paid for helping unload their stuff from the shuttle, yet the truth of the matter was that these people fascinated me, and I wanted to be with them. . . .

Well, no. Not quite. *One* of them fascinated me: the girl I had met earlier. Her name was Grier—no one used their last names, and I never learned hers—and when she shed her shapeless robe, I saw that she was one of the most beautiful women I had ever seen. So, yeah, sex was on my mind, but if getting laid was my only consideration, I could have just as easily bargained an hour or two with one of the ladies at the Sugar Shack. Grier was different; she had accepted me without reservation, despite the fact that I was a stranger in dirty clothes, and had told me that she believed in me even though I'd already told her leader that I didn't believe in God or, by extension, him himself.

When you meet someone like Grier, all you want to do is become part of her world. So I put aside my reluctance and picked up a shovel, and spent the better part of the day helping a few guys dig a couple of deep-pit latrines. It didn't put me any closer to Grier, since she was one of the women erecting the tents, but I figured that I had to take this slowly, show her that I wasn't just a creek-cat on the prowl.

And it seemed to work. Every now and then, when I paused to rest, I'd spot her nearby; she'd look in my direction, favor me with a shy smile, then go back to what she was doing. I considered crawling out of the pit and going over to chat with her, but none of the men with whom I was working—Boris, Jim, Renaldo, Dex—showed any sign of slacking off, so I decided that this would send the wrong signal. I dug and I dug and I dug, and got blisters on my hands and dirt in my teeth, and told myself that I was just helping out some newcomers when all I really wanted to do was look into those lovely eyes once more.

They didn't stop working until Uma went down and twilight was setting in. By then, most of the land had been cleared; the tents were all up, and a bonfire was crackling in the stone-ringed pit in the middle of camp. This time of evening, most of the colonists would trudge down the road to

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Liberty, where they'd stand in line outside the community hall to be doled out some leftover creek-crab stew. The Universalists were serving stew, too, but it wasn't the sour crap made from native crustaceans, it was a thick curry of rice and red beans. No one made a big deal of inviting me to join them for dinner; one of the women just handed me a bowl and spoon, and a couple of men moved aside to let me join the circle around the fire. Much to my surprise, a bottle of dry red wine made its way around the circle; everyone took a sip before passing it on, but no one seemed intent on getting drunk. Instead, it was done in a ritualistic sort of way, like taking communion in church.

Conversation was light, mostly about the trouble everyone had breathing the rarefied air, how hard it was to break ground in mid-winter. Soon the stars began to come out, and they all stopped to admire the sight of Bear rising above the horizon. Grier sat across the fire from me; she looked up now and then, smiling when she caught my eye, but no words were spoken between us. I was in no hurry to rush the matter. Indeed, it felt as if I were among friends.

Through all this, Zoltan sat crosslegged at the edge of the fire, surrounded by his followers and yet aloof, involved in the small-talk but somehow disengaged, a bat-like form whose shadowed features were made eldritch by the dancing flames. After everyone had eaten and the bottle had made its way around, he gently cleared his throat. Conversation stopped as all eyes turned toward him.

"I think," he said, "the time has come to offer prayer."

His congregation put down their plates and spoons, bowed their heads and shut their eyes. I ducked my head a little, but didn't close my eyes; I hadn't prayed since I was a little kid, and didn't see much reason to start then.

"Lord," Zoltan began, "thank you for bringing us safely to this world, and for allowing us to find a new home here. We thank you for this first day on Coyote, and for the blessing of our fellowship. We pray that you'll let us continue in the spirit of the vision revealed during the Holy Transformation, and that our mission here will be successful."

Thinking that he was done, I looked up, only to find that everyone was still looking down. Embarrassed, my first impulse was to bow my head again . . . yet then I saw that Shirow's eyes were open, and that he was gazing at me from across the firepit.

In that moment, there were simply the two of us: the preacher and the atheist, the chimera and the human, separated by flames and yet bound together in a conspiracy of silence. No one else was watching; no one else could see into the place where we had met.

"We thank you for your gift," Zoltan said, never taking his eyes from mine. "Benjamin Harlan, who claims to be an unbeliever, yet who has labored with us and now shares our company. We welcome him as a friend, and hope that he will remain with us through the days to come." My expression must have amused him, for he smiled ever so slightly. "For all these blessings," he finished, "we offer our devotion in your name. Amen."

"Amen," the Universalists murmured, then they opened their eyes and raised their heads. Many looked toward me, smiling as they did so. Un-

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easy by this attention, I hastily looked away . . . and found Grier gazing at me, her face solemn, her eyes questioning.

"Umm . . . amen," I mumbled. "Thanks. I appreciate it." I picked up my plate, started to rise. "Where should I take this? I mean, for it to . . . y'know, be cleaned."

"You mean no one told you?" Dex asked. "You're doing the dishes tonight."

Everyone laughed, and that broke the moment. "Oh, c'mon," Zoltan said. "Don't worry about it. You're our guest. Stay with us a while."

"No, really . . . I've got to get back to camp."

"Why? Is there something else you need to do tonight?"

How did he know this? How had he come to the realization that there was nothing that required my urgent attention? I had been a drifter before I had come to Coyote, and little had changed since then. Home was a tent in the *Long Voyage* camp; no one would break into it because I had little that anyone would want to steal, save for a mildewed sleeping bag, some extra clothes, and a dead flashlight. My place in life was on the lowest rung of the ladder; I got by through doing odd jobs when I could find them and living off the dole when I couldn't. If I froze to death tonight, no one would miss me; my body would be buried in the cemetery, my few belongings claimed by anyone who might want them.

"Well . . ." I sat down again. "If you insist."

"I insist on nothing. Anything you do should be of your own free will. But we're new here and we need a guide, someone who's been on Coyote for a while. You've already demonstrated a willingness to help us." He grinned. "Why not join us? We have enough to share with one more."

Indeed, they did. I'd seen their supplies, and had caught myself wondering now and then how I might be able to sneak something out of here without them noticing. Now that Zoltan was practically inviting me to move in with them, such larceny was unnecessary. All I had to do was play the friendly native, and I'd never have to cut bamboo or dig potatoes ever again.

Still, there was no question that this was a religious cult. Not only that, but they followed someone who looked like a bat. The whole thing was spooky, and I wasn't ready to start wearing a white robe.

"And it doesn't bother you that I'm not . . . I mean, one of you?" Several people frowned at this. "No offense," I quickly added, "but I've already told you that I'm not a believer. Hell . . . I mean, heck . . . I don't even know what you guys believe *in*."

That eased things a bit. Frowns turned to smiles, and a few people chuckled. "Most of us weren't believers when we joined," Renaldo began. "We soon learned that . . ."

"Whether or not you share our beliefs isn't necessary," Shirow said, interrupting Renaldo with an upraised hand. "No one here will proselytize or try to convert you, so long as you neither say or do anything intended to diminish our faith. In fact, I enjoy the fact that we have an atheist in our midst." His face stretched into a broad grin that exposed his fangs. "Benjamin the Unbeliever . . . you know, I rather like the sound of that."

More laughter, but not unkind. I found myself laughing with them. I

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was beginning to like Zoltan; appearances notwithstanding, he seemed like an easy-going sort of guy. And his people weren't all that weird, once you got to know them. Another glance at Grier, and I realized again that I'd like to get to know her most of all.

"Well, if it's Gunga Din you're looking for, I'm your man." I stood up, brushed off the back of my trousers. "I'll come back tomorrow and bring my stuff with me."

"Just like that?" Zoltan looked at me askance. "Don't you have any questions?"

Once again, I was being put on the spot. Everyone gazed at me, awaiting my response. It seemed as if Zoltan was testing me in some way, trying to find out where I was coming from. Oh, I had plenty of questions, all right, but I didn't want to screw the deal. So I picked the most obvious one.

"Sure I do," I said. "How come you look the way you do?"

The smiles vanished, replaced by expressions of reverence. Some turned their eyes toward the fire; others folded their hands together, looked down at the ground. For a moment I thought I'd blown it. Grier didn't look away, though, nor did Zoltan.

"A good question," he said quietly, "and one that deserves an answer." Then he shook his head. "But not tonight. Come back tomorrow, and perhaps we'll tell you . . . if and when you're ready for the truth."

He fell silent once more. My audience with him was over; I was being excused. I mumbled a clumsy goodbye, then left the warmth of the campfire and began trudging back through the cold to my squalid little tent. Yet I didn't feel humiliated. The opposite, in fact. I had just stumbled upon the best scam since Abraham, and all I had to do was go along for the ride.

Or at least so I thought. What I didn't know was where the ride would eventually take me.

Next morning, I packed up my gear, folded my tent, and bid a not-so-fond farewell to *Long Voyage* turf. The camp chief was surprised to see me go, but hardly choked up about it; he'd never liked me very much, and the feeling was mutual. He'd lose rent for a while, but a new ship had just arrived and eventually he'd find some poor bastard who'd want my space. The few friends I had there were surprised as well, and a couple of them tried to get me to tell them where I was headed, but I kept my mouth shut; I didn't want anyone else honing in on the act. Jaime tried to follow me, but I sidetracked him by cutting through Trappers' Guild turf, and by the time he finished apologizing to them, I was on the dirt road leading to the edge of town.

The Universalists weren't shocked when I reappeared; in fact, they were expecting me. Renaldo and Ernst took one look at the ragged tent I tried to pitch near their own and pronounced it to be uninhabitable; from now on, I'd share quarters with them. Clarice wrinkled her nose when she saw my clothes; burn them, she said, they had plenty to spare. They didn't have an extra sleeping bag, unfortunately, but Arthur relieved me of mine and took it away to be washed. And then everyone agreed that I

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smelled nearly as bad as the stuff I'd brought with me; before I had a chance to object, water had been boiled, tarps had been erected around a collapsible washtub, and I was being treated to my first hot bath in so long that I'd forgotten what it was like. Nor did I have to do it alone; while Angela washed my feet, Doria rinsed my hair, and neither of them took offense at the embarrassing development that soon occurred between my legs.

I emerged from my bath feeling as clean as the day I'd been born, wearing clothes so fresh that they crinkled as I walked. And the treatment wasn't over yet; while I was washing up, Grier made breakfast for me. It was light fare—a bowl of hot oatmeal, a couple of slices of fresh-baked bread, a cup of vegetable juice—but it was much better than what I had been eating for the last year. I ate sitting crosslegged on the ground in front of the firepit; Grier sat at my side, silently watching as I wolfed everything down. I had to restrain myself from licking the bowl, and when I was done, I turned to her.

"That was the best"—I covered my mouth to stifle a belch—"breakfast I've had in years. Thanks."

"You're welcome. And thank you for coming back . . . We're glad to have you with us." She paused, and added, "And so is Zoltan. He asked me to tell you that."

"Uh-huh." Although church members were hard at work all around us, continuing to put the camp together, Zoltan was nowhere to be seen. "Where is he, anyway?"

"In meditation with Byron." Grier nodded toward his tent, a couple of dozen feet away. It occupied the center of the camp site; I noticed that its door-flap was closed. "He spends time alone with one of us each day. We try to respect his privacy."

I remembered how he had made himself absent the day before, while everyone else was working. Meditation, my ass; I knew a freeloader when I saw one. But I kept that to myself. "I'm sure he's busy. I'll just have to catch up with him some other time."

"Umm . . ." She hesitated. "One thing you should know is that you don't approach him first. When he's ready to speak to you, he will . . . but you'll have to wait for that moment. Then you can talk to him."

I nodded, trying to keep a poker face. "Still, there's a lot I'd like to ask him. After all, he left me hanging last night."

"Such as?"

"Well, for starters, why he looks like a . . ."

Grier's hand darted forth to cover my mouth. Ian happened to be walking past at that moment; he cast a dark look in my direction, then hastened away, carrying an armload of fresh-cut sourgrass to a bonfire burning nearby. Grier watched him go, then removed her hand from my face. "We found something queer earlier this morning," she said, her voice a little more loud than usual. "A plant of some sort. We were hoping you could tell us what it is."

I glanced again at Zoltan's tent. He'd already demonstrated a keen sense of hearing. "Sure," I said, picking myself off the ground. "That's why I'm here."

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Grier showed me where I could wash my plate and bowl, then led me through the camp, taking me toward the uncleared marshland. We walked slowly, avoiding the people working around us. "You must never speak of this in public," she said, keeping her voice low. "It's a sacred thing, the very root of our faith. In fact, I shouldn't be telling you even this much . . . Zoltan will, when he feels that you're ready."

I shrugged. "Maybe so, but yesterday you guys got off a shuttle in full view of several dozen people. They all saw him . . . and believe me, word travels fast in Shuttlefield. Even if I don't ask, someone else will."

"I know. The same questions we faced back on Earth." She shook her head. "Outsiders have a difficult time understanding the Transformation, how it's central to our beliefs. That's why we're reluctant to speak of it."

"Sure . . . but Zoltan invited me to join you, right? Even though he knows I'm not a believer." She nodded. "So if he did, and your people have accepted me, wouldn't it make sense for me to know?" She frowned, her eyes narrowing as she considered this. "I promise, it's just between you and me. Besides, I've already brought my stuff over here. Take my word for it, I'm not going back any time soon."

"Well . . ." She glanced around. "But only if you won't tell anyone I told you."

I promised her that I wouldn't. By now we were away from the center of the camp; no one else was around. Grier kneeled down behind a vacant tent, and in a hushed voice she told me about the Holy Transformation of Zoltan Shirow.

It happened during the Dixie Rebellion, back in 2241 when a small group of Southern nationalists, nostalgic for the United Republic of America—and before that, the Civil War of the 1860s—attempted to stage an insurrection against the Western Hemisphere Union. For several months, the Army of Dixie committed terrorist actions across the South, planting bombs in government offices in Memphis and Atlanta and assassinating government officials in Birmingham, until the Agencia Security succeeded in breaking up the network. With most of their leaders arrested, the surviving Dixies retreated to the hill country of eastern Tennessee, where they battled Union Guard troops dispatched to arrest them.

One of the Guard soldiers sent in for the mop-up operation was one Corporal Zoltan Shirow, a young recruit who had never seen combat duty before. His patrol was searching for a Dixie hideout near the town of McMinnville when they were caught in an ambush that killed the rest of his team. Critically wounded, Corporal Shirow managed to escape in a maxvee, only to crash his vehicle in a patch of woods just outside town.

"This is the First Station," Grier said. "Zoltan the warrior, the sinner without knowledge of God."

"All right," I said. "I got that part. . . ."

She held up a hand. "It was then that he was discovered by the Redeemer, and brought to the Room of Pain and Understanding."

The Redeemer went by the name of Dr. Owen Dunn. The Universalists held a special place for him roughly analogous to John the Baptist and

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Satan rolled into one person, but the truth was much more prosaic. Dr. Dunn had moved from Massachusetts to Tennessee some years earlier, when he set up a small private practice in McMinnville. On the surface, he appeared to be little more than a country doctor, mending broken bones and delivering babies, yet what no one knew was that he had secretly continued the research that had caused him to be dismissed from the faculty of the Harvard School of Medicine.

Dunn was interested in the creation of *homo superior*. Unlike scientists engaged in genengineering, though, he believed that it was possible to refashion a full-grown adult into a posthuman, using nanoplastiosurgical techniques he had developed while at Harvard. The medical school considered his research to be unethical, though, and rightly so; Dunn could be charitably described as a quack, yet it's more accurate to say that he was a biomedical researcher who had gone insane. To put it in blunt—albeit cliched—terms, he was a mad doctor.

Before leaving Massachusetts, he had stolen some experimental nanites from the med school laboratory, and while living in Tennessee he had quietly continued his research, hoping to eventually produce a breakthrough that would restore his standing in the scientific community. To this end, Dunn had invested his earnings in the surreptitious purchase of commercial medical equipment—including a cellular regenerator of the type used in hospitals for the cloning of new tissue—which he set up in the basement of his house outside McMinnville. When that wasn't sufficient, his experiments took on a gothic air. He resorted to disinterring freshly buried bodies from nearby cemeteries. As Dunn himself would later admit, once he had been arrested and brought to trial, his methods were reminiscent of *Frankenstein*, yet they yielded positive results. Over time, he learned how to restructure flesh and bone from deceased donors into whatever form he desired.

The major drawback, of course, was that he needed a living person to complete his studies . . . and for what he intended to do, it was unlikely that he'd find any volunteers. So when Dunn found the wounded Corporal Shirow in the woods near his house, he was presented with an opportunity he couldn't pass up.

Zoltan was unconscious and close to death, but it was a relatively simple matter to remove the bullet from his left shoulder, perform emergency surgery, and let him heal. During this time, the doctor kept the soldier unconscious. Strapped down upon an operating table in Dunn's basement, there was little chance of anyone finding him; conveniently, the Union Guard assumed that Corporal Shirow had become a deserter. Dunn cloned samples of Shirow's tissue until he had sufficient living flesh and cartilage for his purposes, and once he was sure that the soldier was healthy enough to undergo further operations, Dunn went to work.

"This was the Second Station," Grier told me. "The Redeemer transformed Zoltan into a figure he had seen in his dreams, an avatar of what he considered to be a perfectly adapted form."

"A bat?" I stared at her.

"If that's how you see him, then yes, that's what he looks like. We believe that the Redeemer, however misguided he may have been, was

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working under divine influence . . . that God instructed him to make a man who would resemble Lucifer, in order to test the will of those who would meet him."

"Who came up with this?"

Grier smiled. "Zoltan did. During the Holy Transformation."

Those who later investigated the incident found that Dunn had drawn inspiration from the Gustav Doré illustrations of *The Inferno*, the demons Dante described as occupying the inner circles of Hell. Yet the worst thing that Dunn did to Zoltan now was to keep the soldier conscious; because he wanted to study his reactions, Dunn used local anesthesia whenever possible. As a result, Shirow was aware of everything was that going on, even as he lay face down on the operating table while the doctor meticulously grafted new cartilage and muscle to his shoulder blades, patiently building blood vessels and splicing nerves, eventually cutting fatty tissue from Zoltan's thighs and midriff when Dunn's supply of cloned flesh ran low. In his own sick way, Dunn was brilliant; not only were the new wings not rejected, but Zoltan was gradually able to manipulate them.

Once that phase was successful, Dunn went to work on the soldier's face and hands. And for this, too, Zoltan was the sole witness. The cinderblock basement had no windows, and the nearest neighbor lived a half-mile away. By the time Zoltan's screams were heard by a former patient who happened to drop by one afternoon to deliver a gift to the good doctor, there was little left of the lost soldier's mind.

"It was during his ordeal," Grier went on, "that Zoltan arrived at the Third Station, for while he suffered, he heard the voice of God, telling him that there was a purpose to this."

"Which was. . . ?"

"God gave Zoltan a mission." Although she spoke in hushed tones, she looked me straight in the eye, making sure that I understood everything she said. "He was to spread His word to all who would look past his new form, telling them that humanity was about to undergo a universal transformation . . . not of the body, but of the soul." She smiled then. "Through the Redeemer's actions, God chose Zoltan to be his prophet."

Another way of looking at this was that Zoltan Shirow went mad. That much was clear to me, even if it wasn't to her. During the endless hours, days, and weeks he'd spent in Dunn's basement lab, held immobile while the doctor carefully reshaped his body, the patient gradually slipped over the edge of sanity. And no wonder; if I'd experienced what he had been through, I probably would have been talking to God myself. The mind finds ways of dealing with pain.

"You know," I said, as gently as I could, "it's possible that Zoltan may be. . ."

"Crazy?"

"I didn't say that."

"But that's what you were about to say." Grier gave me a condescending look. "We've all heard this before. I thought the same thing myself, when I first met him. But, Ben, you have to listen to him. You need to open up your heart, let him . . ."

The tent behind us rustled; another church member had come home, probably to get something from his or her belongings. Reminded that she

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shouldn't be speaking to me this way, Grier went silent. Touching my arm, she stood up, took a few steps away from the tent.

"Let me show you what we found," she said aloud. "Maybe you know what it is."

I nodded, and followed her to past the edge of the cleared area. A few yards away from camp, the sourgrass grew chest high, bowed by the winter snow. We pushed through it until Grier stopped and pointed to several spherical plants growing above ground. Resembling gigantic onions, their thick brown leaves were layered with frost.

"Ball-plants," I said. "You should stay clear of them."

"Are they dangerous?"

"Not now, no, but by spring they'll start to flower." I pointed to the wilted stalks protruding from the top of the balls. "When that happens, they'll attract pseudo-wasps . . . and believe me, you don't want to get stung by them."

"Thank you. I'll tell the others." Grier stared at the plants. "Why are they so big? Are they fruit or something?"

"Uh-uh. They're carnivorous." I stepped closer to one of the balls. "In late autumn, just before the first snow, swampers take shelter in them. To hibernate, y'know? They curl up together inside to get out of the cold. But one or two always die during winter, and so the plant feeds off their bodies as they decay. It's sort of like . . ." I searched for the right word. "Symbiosis, I think they call it."

She shuddered. "Horrible."

"Just nature." I shrugged. "That's the way things work around here."

It was also much the same way Zoltan worked. Through temptation, he'd managed to attract her and the other followers to take shelter within the folds of his wings; it wasn't until later, once they were held captive, that he fed off them.

Yet that simile didn't occur to me until some time after. And by then, it was much too late. I had become something of a swamper myself.

Winter went by the way winter does on Coyote: slowly, with every day a little more cold than the day before. For anyone who hasn't lived here, it's hard to realize just how long winter lasts on this world; three times longer than on Earth, it sometimes seems as if spring will never come. People rose early in Shuttlefield, knocking another few inches of fresh snow off their shacks and checking to see if anyone had died during the night before trudging over the community hall in Liberty to receive another bowl of gruel. And then you'd have the rest of the day to kill. Try to stay warm. Try not to do anything that would raise the attention of the Proctors or the Union Guard. Try to stay alive. Try to stay sane.

It was a little less difficult for me to get by, now that I'd taken up with the Universalists. Or at least for a while. They'd brought plenty of food with them, and their heated tents were a luxury no one else in Shuttlefield had. They quietly went about their way, a small group of pilgrims in monkish robes who kept to themselves except when they went into town to barter spare items for whatever they might need. In the first few weeks after their arrival, visitors were welcomed to their camp. No effort

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was spared to make them feel at home, until it soon become apparent that many of those who dropped by were merely looking for handouts. Seeing their rations running low, the Universalists reluctantly stopped being quite so generous, and that's when the trouble began.

The first sign of friction came when Caitlin, one of the younger church members, was harassed by a couple of Cutters as she tried to trade a power cell for a pair of catskin gloves at one of the kiosks. The craftsman tested the cell and claimed that it was depleted by 10 percent; when Caitlin insisted that the cell was fully charged, two Cutters who happened to be loitering nearby—or, more likely, following the girl—stepped in. At some point in the argument, one of them made a grab for Caitlin, saying that he wanted to see what she was hiding beneath her robe. Caitlin managed to get away; she rushed back and told everyone what happened, and that evening during dinner, Zoltan forbade anyone from going out alone.

A few days later, some New Frontiers guys sauntered into our camp, demanding to see "the freak"—meaning Zoltan—and be fed, in no particular order. When Ernst informed them that the Reverend Shirow was in meditation and that we had no food to spare, they got ugly about it; one of them shoved Ernst to the ground while two more tried take off with a RTF generator. That was when I first saw how capable the Universalists were at defending themselves; within moments, the intruders were surrounded by church members wielding thick quarter-staffs they'd fashioned from bamboo stalks. A few bruises later, the gang was sent running, but that evening, for the first time, Zoltan declared that we would begin posting overnight watches, with everyone taking turns guarding the camp.

Yet, I can't honestly say that the Universalists were without blame. By early Machidiel, the third month of winter, their food supply was running short, and so the church members were forced to go into Liberty every morning to eat breakfast at the community hall. It wouldn't have been so bad if they had stuck together as a group, but some of them took it upon themselves to take the opportunity to sit with other colonists . . . and once they'd made their acquaintance, they couldn't resist the urge to tell them that the Reverend Zoltan Shirow was God's chosen messenger to Coyote.

By then, I'd been allowed to know the details of the holy mission. According to Zoltan, God had told him to seek out a group of disciples and take them to a place where no one had gone before, where they would spread the word of universal transformation. This was why he had brought his followers to Coyote; they'd done so by taking everything they owned—bank accounts, real estate, personal property, the works—and surrendering it all to the church, which in turn sold or exchanged them for berths aboard the *Magnificent Voyage*, along with all the supplies they could bribe Union Astronautica officials at Highgate into letting them carry to the new world. So it was no wonder that they had come well-stocked; some of these people had exchanged houses for tents, family fortunes for a diet of rice and beans.

And, indeed, the people who joined the Church of Universal Transformation had come from all walks of life. Ian had been an AI systems engineer, Renaldo a school teacher, Clarice an award-winning dramatist, Dex an attorney; many came from wealthy families, and I was surprised to

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find that Doria's husband—her former husband, rather; they'd separated when she joined the church—was a member of the Union Proletariate. Grier had been a student of historical linguistics at the University of Puerto Rico when she, like the others, had heard about the former Union Guard soldier who'd undergone hideous torture at the hands of a madman and survived to proclaim that the human race was on the verge of becoming something new and better. None of them had been poor or ignorant, but they had all been searching for greater meaning in their lives, something in which they could believe: a revival of the soul, far beyond the false promises of social collectivism. And while countless thousands who'd heard Zoltan's message had turned away, this small handful had chosen to cast aside everything else and follow him. They'd found happiness in the church, a purpose for existence; no wonder they wanted to share this revelation with those they met, forgetting Zoltan's early promise that they wouldn't try to convert anyone to their beliefs.

Yet they found no new disciples on Coyote. The people who'd come here had made sacrifices of their own; their lives were hard, and most didn't like the way they were being treated by the Matriarch Hernandez and her cronies. Some of them weren't going to take it anymore; during the long winter, rumors circulated through Shuttlefield about various individuals who'd suddenly vanished, packing up their gear and heading off into the wilderness before the Guard and the Proctors knew they were gone. But the vast majority who'd remained behind weren't ready to surrender themselves to a cult operated by a guy who looked like a demon and claimed to be a prophet. The Universalists had been virtually unknown when they left Earth, but by the end of winter every person in New Florida knew of their beliefs . . . and no one wanted to have anything to do with them.

Although I lived in their camp, I wasn't a member of their church. Zoltan and I remained on friendly terms, but he never called me into his tent, as he often did with everyone else. This distinction was lost on everyone I knew in Shuttlefield. I'd had few friends before I'd moved out of the *Long Voyage* camp. The attitude, however, of those few that I did have, changed toward me; they no longer greeted me when I saw them in town, but walked past as quickly as they could, refusing to make eye contact. At first I thought it was jealousy—after all, I was now living in comfort, with no other responsibilities than to tell a bunch of greenhorns what plants or animals to avoid—but it wasn't until I saw Jaime Hodge that I learned the real reason.

He was in line outside the community hall late one afternoon, waiting to be let in for dinner, when I walked up behind him. I usually ate dinner at camp, but I happened to be running an errand in Liberty, so I decided to eat at the hall instead of waiting until I got home. Jaime glanced back when I joined the chow line, saw me standing there, then turned away.

"How's it going, dude?" I asked. "Keeping warm?"

"Yeah. Sure." He looked straight ahead.

"Days are getting a little longer." The sun wasn't down yet, and it was almost 1900. "Think spring is almost sprung."

"Could be."

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I tried to think of something to say. The left shoulder of his parka was becoming frayed; I could see tufts of fiber peeking through the seam. "Y'know, I could help you with this," I said, touching his jacket. "I know a girl back at my camp who's good at patching. . . ."

"I can take care of it myself." Jaime shook off my hand. "And if I want religion, I'll get it my own way."

"Huh? Hey, whoa . . . just trying to be helpful. I know someone who's good at patching up clothes. . . ."

"You know what I'm talking about."

I did, but I wasn't about to let it slide. "Jaime," I said quietly, "let me tell you something. I may be staying with them, but I'm not *with* them. Y'know what I mean?"

He seemed to think about that. Finally, he turned around, looked me in the eye. "If you're not one of them," he said, "then why did you park your tent over there?"

"Free food. No rent. No hassle." I shrugged. "I'm tellin' you, running into these guys is the best thing that's ever happened to me."

I was trying to make it light, but it didn't work. His face darkened, his lip curling into an ugly smirk. "Right. All the food you can eat, and all you have to do is suck up to the bat."

My face grew warm. "Now, wait a minute," I said, taking a step closer. "If you think . . ."

"No, *you* wait a minute." Jaime planted a hand against my chest, shoved me back. "Maybe I'm hungry, but at least no one's trying to brainwash my ass. So far as I can tell, that's what's going to happen to you . . . if it hasn't already."

There was nothing guys in Shuttlefield liked more than watching a fight. From the corner of my eye, I saw people beginning to close in, forming a circle around us. Beyond the edge of the crowd, I caught a glimpse of a Proctor hovering nearby. He was doing nothing to stop this, though; from the look on his face, he was anticipating a good brawl before dinner. And no one was on my side; they knew who I was, and they were hoping that Jaime would smear my face in the mud.

I caught myself wishing that a couple of the Universalists were with me just then. Two of the larger members, like Boris and Jim, and armed with quarter-staffs. But they weren't there, and now I knew Zoltan's order that no one should leave camp alone applied to me as well.

"Ease down, buddy." Carefully keeping my hands in my pockets, I lowered my voice. "I'm not trying to start nothing with you."

"Yeah? Well, then go tell your pals not to start nothing with us." Jaime wasn't backing down, but he wasn't pushing it either. Whatever friendship still remained between us was staying his hand. "I don't want to know about God, I don't want to turn into a bat, and if they don't find someplace else to carry on with their weird shit, we're coming over and having ourselves a little Easter egg hunt."

Ugly murmurs from all around us—*you tell 'em, guy* and *we'll bust their asses* and so forth—and that was when I realized, for the first time, just how much danger we were in. The fact that a big, mean smile was plastered on the face of the nearby Proctor only confirmed my suspicion; if a

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mob descended upon the Universalist camp, nothing would stop them. Not the Proctors, not the Union Guard. Zoltan and his followers had become pariahs.

"I hear you," I said. "Is that it?"

Jaime said nothing for a moment. "Yeah, that's it." He stepped back, cocked his head away from the hall. "Go on, beat it. Get out of here."

Disappointed that they weren't going to see a fight, the crowd began to dissolve. Watching them shoulder each other as they sought to resume their former places in line, I couldn't help but feel sorry for them. Caught like rats in a maze, all they could worry about was whether a small band of pilgrims would try to show them a way out. Until this moment, I hadn't realized just how much the Universalists had come to mean to me. They weren't just two hots and a cot, but something more.

I'd lost my appetite, though, so I started to head toward the road leading back to Shuttlefield. Feeling a hand on my arm, I looked around, saw that Jaime had stepped out of line. Thinking he intended to restart our quarrel, I stiffened up, but he quickly shook his head.

"Relax. I don't mean nothing." Behind him, a few people glanced in our direction, but no one did anything. The front door had just opened, and the line was shuffling toward it. "Look, I'm sorry," he continued, his voice a near whisper. "My fault. I shouldn't have started it."

"Yeah, sure. Okay . . ."

"Look, can I give you some advice? Between you and me?" I nodded. "Get out of there. Fold your tent, pack up your gear, and scram. We'll take you back."

"Who will?"

"Your friends, man. The people who care for you. . . ."

"I know who they are," I said. And then I turned my back on him and walked away.

Later that evening, after dinner was over and everyone was still seated around the fire, I told them what had happened. Several weeks earlier, when they had still believed that no one would do them any harm, they might have been willing to turn the other cheek. The incident with the New Frontiers gang had put them on their guard, though, and when I got to the part about the not-so-veiled threat Jaime had made, they weren't so complacent.

Grier was sitting next to me. As I spoke, she put an arm around my shoulder; after a few minutes, it traveled down to my waist. She may have only meant to offer comfort, but somehow it didn't seem that way. Grier and I had become close after I'd moved in with the Universalists, yet I'd come to accept the fact that, while she clearly liked me, there was little chance that our relationship would ever become more than friendship. While sex wasn't absolutely forbidden among his disciples, abstinence was one of the virtues Zoltan preached, and after a while I'd given up on the idea of sleeping with her. Yet now she was snuggling up with me, and it was hard not to become aroused by her warm touch.

If Zoltan noticed, though, he was too distracted to care. He sat quietly while I spoke, hunched forward with his hands clasped together between

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his knees, wings folded against his back, gazing into the fire. When I was done, an uneasy silence fell upon the circle. Everyone waited for him to respond, but he remained silent for a few moments.

"Thank you, Ben," he said at last. "I'm glad that you've brought this to our attention . . . and I'm pleased that you were able to escape without harm. It must have been difficult, standing up a friend like that."

"He's not my friend." My throat felt dry as I said this. "I thought he was, but . . . well, that's changed."

Zoltan nodded sadly. "Much has changed now." He raised his eyes to look at the others. "Make no mistake about it . . . if Ben's warning is correct, and I believe it is, then we're no longer safe here. We can post more guards at night, and try to keep everyone out of town unless it's absolutely necessary, but in the long run it will be pointless."

"I don't agree, Reverend." Standing behind Zoltan, Ian leaned against his staff, the hood of his robe pulled up against the cold wind that snapped at the fire. "If someone tries to attack us, I'm sure we can defend ourselves. We've got thirty men and women. . . ."

"Against how many?" This from Boris; sitting on the other side of the fire, his face was pensive. "There's almost three thousand people in Shuttlefield. If even a small fraction of them decided to come down on us, we'd be overrun. And if Ben's right, we can't expect any help from the Proctors or the Union."

"But they're supposed to be protecting us," Clarice protested. "Why wouldn't they step in if they saw. . . ?"

"You weren't here for the last First Landing Day." When I spoke up again, everyone went quiet. "That's the annual holiday to commemorate the arrival of the *Alabama* . . . happens on Uriel 47, at the end of summer. Last year, while the big feast was going on at the community hall, some Rigil Kent guerrillas snuck into Shuttlefield and blew up a shuttle."

"I don't understand." Ian looked confused. "Who . . . I mean, what . . . is Rigil Kent? And why would they want to blow up a shuttle?"

"A group from the *Alabama*. They've staged sneak attacks on Liberty. They come across the East Channel from Midland, mainly to steal guns. The last time they were here, someone named Rigil Kent left a note on the boathouse door, claiming responsibility for the bombing and saying that they would continue until the WHU returned Liberty to its rightful owners. There was a small riot when that happened . . . everyone was dancing around the shuttle, watching it burn. The Guard couldn't do a thing about it, neither could the Proctors. So if they can't stop something like that, how could. . . ?"

"Interesting." Zoltan was intrigued. "And you say they're coming over from Midland?"

"That's where they went after *Glorious Destiny* arrived." I shrugged. "From what I've heard, though, no one's been able to figure out exactly where they are. It's a big island, four times larger than New Florida. Plenty of places for a hundred people to hide. So the Guard hasn't been able to . . ."

"That's good to know," Renaldo said, "but it doesn't get us any closer to fighting off . . ."

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"You're missing the point." Zoltan raised a hand. "First, there's no way we can defend ourselves . . . not against a lynch mob, at least, and that's the inevitable outcome if we stay here much longer. And second, even if we managed to remain here, it would only be because we've decided to lay low."

He gazed at the others. "But that's not our mission. The Lord has ordained us to spread the word of universal transformation. This is why we're here. It's clear to me, though, that our efforts have become futile."

Several people gasped. Others stared in disbelief at their leader. Feeling Grier tremble, I wrapped my arm around her; she sank closer against me, and I could tell that she was afraid.

"Yes . . . futile." Zoltan's voice became solemn. "Liberty and Shuttlefield are lost to God's word, just as Sodom and Gomorrah once were. Destruction awaits this place, and there's nothing we can do. Therefore, like Lot and his family, we must move on."

"Where?" Renaldo demanded.

"You need ask?" Zoltan looked up at him. "You haven't been listening to our brother Benjamin. He has shown us the way."

At this moment, I saw what was coming. "Oh, no, wait a minute . . ."

"Be quiet!" he snapped.

This was the first time I'd heard him raise his voice; like the others, I was stunned to silence. Zoltan rose from his seat, his wings unfurling like great brown sails that caught the night wind. In that instant, he became a bat-winged messiah, standing tall against the giant planet looming behind him. If anything else remains with me, it's this single moment.

"The path is evident," he said. "Our destiny is clear. We shall go to Midland."

A range of expressions passed across the faces of his congregation: disbelief, uncertainty, dread. Then, as if a switch had been thrown, acceptance descended upon them. The prophet had spoken. He had received a vision, one which would lead them from peril to the destiny he'd foretold. They had followed him across forty-six light-years to this world; they would happily let him lead them just a few miles more.

Only it wasn't just a few miles, or even a few hundred. And they had no idea what they were getting themselves into. "You don't . . ." My voice almost choked. "I'm sorry, but . . . Reverend, but I don't think you understand. . . ."

"Understand what?"

"You don't . . . I mean, Midland is uncharted territory. The only maps we have of it were made from orbit. The only people who've explored the interior are the *Alabama* colonists who've gone there. . . ."

"Then we'll find them."

"How? No one knows where they are."

He sadly shook his head, as if this was only a minor detail and I was a child asking foolish questions. "Always the unbeliever. You've been among us for all this time, and still you haven't learned the truth." Knowing chuckles from the fire as he regarded me with fondness. "God will show us the way, Benjamin. He will lead us, and He will protect us."

Then he turned to the rest of his flock. "Rest tonight. We'll begin mak-

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ing our preparations tomorrow. Be discreet, though . . . don't let anyone outside this camp know of our plans. With luck, we'll make our exodus within the next few days, before anyone knows we're gone."

He looked back at me again. "Benjamin, you're welcome to come with us. In fact, we would appreciate your guidance. But you're under no obligation." He paused. "Will you join us?"

"I . . . I'm going to have to think about this."

"By all means, please do."

He bowed his head and led his followers in a brief prayer. Then the meeting broke up; people got up, began going about the usual chores they did before bed. There was nothing for me to do, so I headed for the tent I shared with Ernst and Renaldo when Grier caught me by the arm.

"Where do you think you're going?" she asked.

"Well, it's not my turn to do the dishes or stand watch, so I . . ."

"How fortunate. It's not my turn either." She leaned a little closer. "And you know what else? Juanita and Mary have decided that they'd rather spend the night with Clarice and Bethany. So guess what that gives me?"

"Umm . . . a tent by yourself, I think."

Her eyes were bright as she shook her head. "No. A tent with you."

Then, she led me away, taking me to a place where, for a few long and memorable hours, we were alone together. And by the time the sun rose the next morning, there was no going back.

We left Shuttlefield three days later, in the early morning just before sunrise. No one saw us as we set out on foot, a procession of men and women quietly walking through the silent town, duffel bags strapped to our backs. We took as much as we could carry, but there was much we had to leave behind; once our campsite was found abandoned, no doubt the townspeople would fight over discarded tent heaters, electrical tools, and generators. As it was, we were happy just to leave Shuttlefield in peace.

We took the road into Liberty, then cut across a potato field toward Sand Creek. The creek was still frozen over, so we didn't anticipate any trouble crossing it. A thick ice-fog lay over the field, making it seem as if we were walking through a mist of pearl; we couldn't see more than ten feet ahead, so it came as a surprise when, just before we reached the creek, we came upon a lone figure standing near its banks, wearing a dark cloak with its hood raised.

"Good morning," he said, his voice an electronic purr from the grilled mouth of his metallic head. "I take it you're leaving."

In all the time that I'd been on Coyote, I'd seen Manuel Castro only a few times, and then only from a distance. One of the Savants who'd been aboard the *Glorious Destiny*, he was the colony's lieutenant governor, Matriarch Hernandez's right-hand man . . . if one could consider a mechanistic posthuman still a man.

Zoltan was at the head of the line. He wore his robe over his folded wings, and as the rest of us came to a halt, he stepped forward, pulling down his hood so that Castro could see him face to face. They made an odd pair: black and white, the cyborg and the gargoyle. "With all due respect, yes, we are. I hope you don't take it as an insult."

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A strange rattle from the Savant: an approximation of a laugh. "I should, but I won't. The Reverend Zoltan Shirow, isn't it? I'm sorry we haven't met until now. I've been told that your presence in Shuttlefield has been . . . troublesome, shall we say?"

"If there's been any trouble, it hasn't been our fault." Zoltan paused. "I hope you're not here to stop us."

"Not at all. I'm only here to enjoy the sunrise." Castro raised a claw-like hand from beneath his cloak, gestured toward the wan yellow sun burning through the mist. "Beautiful, isn't it? This is the time of day I enjoy the most."

I glanced around, half-expecting to see Guard soldiers emerging from the fog. If Castro had brought any soldiers with him, our exodus would have been short lived; we were unarmed save for the quarter-staffs a few of us carried. But the Savant was alone.

"Then you don't mind?" Zoltan asked.

"Not at all." Castro shook his head. "From time to time, various individuals make an effort to leave the colony. If they're people whose talents we value, then we endeavor to keep them here, but more often than not, we allow potential subversives the option of going away. We let them think that they've escaped—but believe me, there's little that happens that the Central Committee doesn't know about."

Grier and I gave each other an uncertain look. How could they have known what we were planning? There were rumors that the Proctors had informants among the colonists, yet we had taken pains not to speak to anyone about our plans. On the other hand, perhaps the Savant was merely pretending to know something that he really didn't.

"We aren't subversives." Zoltan's voice took on a defensive edge. "All we ever wanted to do was settle here in peace."

"I won't argue your intentions. Nonetheless, if you'd decided to stay, then there would have been trouble, and we would have been forced to take measures against those who might have harmed you, or even you yourselves. So it's just as well that you leave before it comes to that. No one will stop you, Reverend. You're free to do as you will."

"Thank you." Zoltan bowed slightly. "You're quite generous."

"Only looking out for the colony's best interests." Again, the strange laugh. "I assume you're heading to Midland. That's where most people go when they leave here."

The Universalists stirred uneasily, glancing at one another. We'd already decided that, if we were stopped by the Guard, we would claim that we were going to establish a small settlement on the northern tip of New Florida. Yet Zoltan decided to be truthful. "That's our intent, yes. After we're across the creek, we plan to hike downstream until we reach the Shapiro Pass. There we'll build rafts and use them to cross the Eastern Divide until we reach the East Channel."

"Oh, no . . . no. That's the worst way possible. The Shapiro Pass is treacherous. Believe me, your rafts will be destroyed in the rapids."

"You know another way?" I asked, stepping forward so that the Savant could see me.

Castro briefly regarded me with his glass eyes, then he looked at Zoltan

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once more. "Your guide?" he asked. Zoltan nodded, and the Savant shook his head again. "Once you've crossed Sand Creek, go due east until you reach North Bend. Follow it southeast until you reach the Divide. You should be able to reach it by tomorrow afternoon. There you'll find the Monroe Pass. It's marked on your map, if you're carrying one. That's where you'll find another way to cross the East Channel."

He was right. The Monroe Pass was much closer; I'd decided to use the Shapiro Pass because that was how the Montero Expedition had left New Florida three years ago. "What do you mean, we'll find another way to cross?"

"As I said, others have gone before you. You'll find them. Trust me."

I wasn't quite ready to trust Savant Castro, but if what he said was true, it would cut a couple of days off our journey. And I had to admit, any way off New Florida that didn't entail braving the Shapiro Pass sounded good to me. I looked at Zoltan and reluctantly nodded; he said nothing to me, but turned to Castro once more. "Thank you. We're in your debt."

"Not at all. But tell me one thing . . . what do you expect to find out there? Surely not the original colonists. They've made it clear that they don't want anything to do with us . . . except perhaps whatever they can steal in the middle of the night."

"We're hoping we may be able to change their minds." Zoltan smiled. "Since you're being helpful, perhaps you can tell us where we might find them."

If the Savant could have grinned, he probably would have. "If I knew that . . . well, things would be different. I'm sorry, but you'll have to seek them out yourselves. In any event, good luck to you. Farewell."

And with that, he stepped back into the mist, drifting away like a black wraith. We heard the crunch of his metal feet against the icy ground, and then he was gone.

Zoltan waited a few moments, then turned to the rest of us. "If Pharaoh had let the Children of Israel leave Egypt so easily, then a lot of trouble could have been avoided. I take this as a good sign."

Or an omen, I thought. Moses and his people spent forty years in the wilderness not because of anything the Egyptians did to them, but because of what they did to themselves . . . including the worship of false idols.

But I didn't voice my thoughts, and perhaps this was the first act of my betrayal.

We crossed Sand Creek without incident; the ice was still strong, and we safely made it to the other side. Instead of going downstream, though, we took the Savant's advice and went due east, following the orbital map and electronic compass Ian had bartered from a kiosk for one of our generators. As the group's guide, I was the one entrusted with the map and compass, but it wasn't long before we found that they were unnecessary; a trail had already been cut through the high grass and spider-bush on the other side of the creek, marked here and there with strips of blue cloth tried around trunks of faux-birch. As Castro said, someone else had gone before us.

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We marched all day, stopping now and then to rest, until by early evening we'd reached North Bend, a broad stream that ran parallel to Sand Creek. By then, we could make out the great limestone wall of the Eastern Divide, only about fifteen miles to the southeast. It was tempting to press onward, but we were footsore and tired, so Zoltan called a halt. We pitched our tents and gathered wood, and by the time Uma went down and Bear was rising to the East, we were gathered around a warm campfire, eating beans and gazing up at the stars. After dinner, Zoltan led his followers in prayer, asking for His help in the long journey ahead.

I prayed for something else: a few more weeks of cold weather. There was another reason why we'd left the colony on short notice. The grasslands of New Florida were haunted by boids: huge, carnivorous avians, known to lurk in the tall grass and attack anything unwise enough to pass through their territory . . . and beyond Shuttlefield and Liberty, both guarded by a broad circle of motion-activated particle-beam guns, all of New Florida was their domain. But the boids migrated south during winter, so for a few months it was possible to hike across the northern part of the island without worrying about them. And just as well; boids had no fear of humans, and our bamboo staffs would have been useless against them.

Still, I volunteered for the overnight watch, and didn't return to the tent I shared with Grier and Clarice until Michael relieved me shortly after midnight. Grier's body kept me warm, as she had ever since our first night together, but it was a long time before I was able to go to sleep. I couldn't help but remember the exchange between Zoltan and Castro.

The Savant asked the Reverend what he expected to find out there. Why had Zoltan eluded his question? What *was* he expecting to find out here?

I didn't know, and it would be a long time before I learned the truth.

Daybreak came cold and bleak, with a new layer of frost on the ground. Even though we were only about twenty-five miles from the colony, it seemed as if Shuttlefield was a comfortable place we'd left far behind. A breakfast of lukewarm porridge heated over the dying cinders of our campfire, another prayer by Zoltan, then we hefted our bags on our aching backs and continued down the trail, following the creek toward the Eastern Divide.

Yet the day was bright and clear, and by the time Uma had risen high in the cloudless blue sky, it seemed as if the world had thawed a bit. Everyone's spirits began to rise; the Universalists sang traditional hymns as they marched along—"Onward, Christian Soldiers," "The Old Rugged Cross," "Oh, What a Friend We Have in Jesus"—while the Eastern Divide grew steadily closer, no longer a thin purple line across the horizon but now a massive buttress through which West Bend had carved a narrow gorge.

We were within the shadows of the Eastern Divide, close enough to the Monroe Pass that we could hear the low rumble of rapids, when we came upon a sign: a wooden plank, nailed to the burnt stump of a blackwood tree that had been felled by lightning. I was at the front of the line, so I walked closer to read what was painted on it:

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Welcome to Thompson's Ferry!
Passage Negotiable—Trade & Barter
Stop Here—Lay Down Guns—Yell Loud & Wait
Trespassers Shot on Sight!

Shading my eyes with my hand, I peered up at the limestone bluffs. No movement save for the breeze wafting through the bare branches of some scraggly trees that clung to the rock. The sign looked old, the paint faded and peeling. No telling how long it had been there.

"Hello!" I yelled. "Anyone there?" My voice echoed off the bluffs; I waited another few moments, then stepped past the sign.

A high-pitched *zeee!* past my right ear, then a bullet chipped a splinter off the top of the sign. A half-second later, the hollow bang of the gunshot reverberated from somewhere up in the rocks. I instinctively ducked, raising my hands above my head.

"Hey, cut it out!" I shouted. "I'm unarmed!"

"Can't you read?" a voice yelled down.

"I can read . . . can't you hear?" I straightened up, keeping my hands in sight. From the corner of my eye, I could see the Universalists ducking their heads or diving for cover behind spider-bushes. All except Zoltan, who calmly stood his ground, a little annoyed but otherwise unperturbed.

"We're not carrying!" I couldn't see where the shot had come from, but whoever had opened fire on me was a crack shot; otherwise I would have been missing part of my skull. "We're just trying to. . . !"

"We come in peace." Zoltan barely raised his voice, yet he spoke loud enough to be heard up on the bluffs. "We mean no harm. We only want passage across the channel." Then he turned to the others. "Come out," he said quietly. "Let them see you."

His followers reluctantly emerged from hiding, leaving their packs where they'd dropped them. Everyone looked scared, and some seemed ready to run back the way we'd come, but, as always, their faith in their leader was greater than their fear. Soon they were all out in the open once more, their hands in plain view.

A minute passed, then a figure emerged from hiding among the boulders near the entrance to the pass: a long-haired boy, wearing a catskin coat a size too large, his trousers tucked into old Union Guard boots. He ambled toward us, a carbine cradled in his arms. He couldn't have been more than twelve, yet his distrustful eyes were those of a man twice his age.

"Who are you?" he demanded, looking first at me, then at Zoltan.

"The Reverend Zoltan Shirow, of the Church of Universal Transformation." Zoltan spoke before I could answer. "These people are my congregation, and this is our guide, Benjamin Harlan. I apologize for our lack of manners. We didn't think anyone was here."

"Huh . . . yeah, well, you got fooled, didn't you?" His gaze swept across everyone, taking us in. "You have anything to trade, or are you just. . . ?"

Then he stopped, cocking his head slightly as if listening to something we couldn't hear. I recognized the motion; the boy had a subcutaneous implant. He murmured something beneath his breath, then looked at us again. "Okay, c'mon. Pick up your stuff and follow me." He grinned. "Mind yourself, though. My brother's up there, and he hasn't shot anyone since last week."

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It sounded like teenage braggadocio, but I wasn't ready to push it. "After you," I said, then hefted my bag and let him lead the way.

The trail took us into the Monroe Pass, where it became a narrow shelf gradually eroded into the limestone. We went slowly, picking our way across slick rocks as icy water sprayed us; one false step meant falling into the rapids churning just a few feet below. The kid stopped every now and then to look back, making sure that he hadn't lost anyone; it occurred to me that he and his brother didn't really need to stand guard duty, because the gorge itself was its own natural fortification. Whatever they were protecting, it must be valuable. Either that, or they simply didn't like people dropping in unannounced.

We emerged from the gorge to find ourselves on the other side of the Eastern Divide. A stony beach lay beneath the towering white wall; West Bend emptied into the East Channel, and only a couple of miles across the water lay the rocky coast of Midland.

Thompson's Ferry was a small village of faux-birch shingled cabins elevated on stilts, with smoke rising from their stone chimneys. Goats and pigs sulked within small pens matted with cut sourgrass, and from somewhere nearby I heard the barking of a small dog. Jutting out into the channel was a small pier, against which was tied a large raft; skin kayaks lay upside-down on the beach, and fishing nets were draped across wooden racks. I smelled salt and fish and woodsmoke, and in the half-light of the late afternoon sun, the whole scene looked as gentle as a painting.

But then I heard pebbles crunch underfoot behind us, and I looked around to see a young man standing on a footpath leading up to the top of the bluffs, holding a rifle in his hands. Seeing me gazing at him, he gave me a tip of his cap. This was the sentry who'd fired the warning shot; he'd been tailing us ever since we'd entered the pass. I nodded back to him: no hard feelings, mate, just don't use me for target practice again.

The kid led us to a lodge in the center of town, a large blackwood cabin with a sat dish fastened to its chimney. "Hang on," he said, "I'll go get the boss." But he was only halfway up the back porch steps when its door swung open and the chief appeared.

Six feet and a few inches tall, with a lot of muscle packed into skin that looked as weather-beaten as his clothes and a greying beard that reached halfway to his chest, he looked as if he had been molded by the world in which he lived: stone and sand, tidewater and salt. "Thank you, Garth," he murmured. "I'll take it from here." He stepped to the railing. "Let's get down to the basics. Name's Clark Thompson, and this is my place. You've already met my nephew Garth, and that's Lars, my other nephew . . . they're sort of the reception committee."

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Thompson." Zoltan walked forward. "I'm the Reverend Zoltan. . . ."

"Already know who you are, Rev. We're a long way from Shuttlefield, but word gets around." Thompson grinned; he was missing a couple of teeth. "Even if you hadn't split town a couple of days ago, it's hard not to hear about someone who looks like you do."

Laughter from around us. I turned my head, saw that about twenty people had appeared, emerging from the adjacent cabins: several men, a

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few women, three or four kids, each of them as tough as Clark Thompson and his kin. A couple of men carried guns; they weren't aiming them at us, but it was the second time today I'd been welcomed by men with loaded weapons, and I still wasn't quite over the first time.

Zoltan remained unruffled. "If you know who we are, then you know why we're here." Thompson nodded, said nothing. "All we want is a way across the channel. We're willing to trade whatever we can for . . ."

"Happy to hear it. My boys wouldn't have let you here if you weren't. But only a few people know about this place, and most of them are here right now. So who told you how to get here?"

"Savant Castro." Thompson scowled as I said this; behind me, I could hear whispers through the crowd. "He told us they sometimes let people leave, if he thinks keeping 'em around is more trouble than it's worth. I guess we qualify."

"Maybe so . . . but Manny Castro doesn't strike me as any sort of humanitarian." Thompson shook his head. "Damned if I know what it is, but he's got his own agenda." He absently gazed up at the divide, as if trying to make up his mind. If he refused to give us a ride across the channel, we'd have little choice but to turn back; given the size of the settlement, it was obvious we couldn't remain here "All right," he said at last, "we'll get you across the channel. We've never said no to anyone, and I'm not about to start now."

"Thank you." I tried not to let my relief show.

"It's my business. Just one more question . . . where do you think you'll go, once you reach Midland?"

"We want to find the original colonists," Zoltan began, and everyone standing around broke out in laughter. He waited until it subsided, then went on. "Any help you may be able to give us would be appreciated."

"Can't help you much there, preacher," Thompson said. "We've only seen them a few times ourselves, and when we do, they're not very sociable."

That had to be a lie. Thompson's Ferry was the only settlement on New Florida besides Liberty and Shuttlefield; if the *Alabama* colonists came here at all, then it must be to trade. And when people get together to trade, they usually swap more than material goods. But we were on the chief's good side, so I kept my mouth shut.

Thompson pointed to a spot on the beach a few yards away. "You can camp out over there. Dinner's on the house . . . hope you like chowder, because that's the only thing on the menu. We'll dicker over the fare later." He turned to his younger nephew. "C'mon, Garth. Let's tell your aunt we've got guests."

That was the end of it. Garth followed his uncle into the lodge; the crowd began to melt away, and the Universalists carried their gear to the place where Thompson said we could pitch our tents. Exhausted, I slumped down on the steps. The sun was beginning to set behind the Eastern Divide, with a stiff wind coming off the channel, but, for the moment, we'd found a place of refuge, and some semblance of hospitality.

And yet, I couldn't help but wonder whether I shouldn't have taken Jaime's advice.

* * *

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Dinner was served in the lodge, within a main room illuminated by fish-oil lamps hung from the rafters and warmed by a driftwood fire blazing in the stone hearth. Apparently, the residents of Thompson's Ferry gathered here every night, for when we trooped in through the door, we found the locals already seated at a long blackwood table that ran down the center of the room. Space was made for us at the table, and soon an enormous pot of redfish chowder was brought out from the kitchen by a pleasant older lady whom everyone called Aunt Molly. Talking nonstop, she ladled out bowls of chowder, added a thick slice of homemade bread to each plate, then handed them to the nearest person, who passed them down the line. No one began eating until everyone was served, though, and after Aunt Molly had bowed her head and said grace.

The only person missing from the table was Zoltan. He'd vanished into his tent as soon as it was erected, and hadn't reappeared by the time his followers had finished setting up camp. Once more, I was mystified by his reclusiveness, even if it didn't seem to bother anyone else. Renaldo begged another bowl of chowder from Aunt Molly, then quietly went out the door with it, apparently taking it to Zoltan's tent. Clark Thompson watched him go, but said nothing. After dinner, Clark tapped me on the shoulder and gestured for me to follow him into an adjacent room.

"Pretty rude of the Reverend, skipping out like that," he said once he'd shut the door. "Can't say I appreciate it very much."

"He's like that. Sorry." The walls were crowded with stacked barrels, with boxes and crates and coiled rope scattered here and there, surrounding a table and two chairs beneath an oil lamp. "Has to have his private time once a day. To meditate with his followers."

"Yeah, well . . ." Thompson turned up the lamp a little higher, then sat down behind the table. "Next time he decides to meditate when my wife's cooked a meal for him, I'm going to feed him fish-head soup instead."

"Knowing him, he'd probably thank her for it."

A quizzical smile. "You're not with them, are you? Oh, I can see you're traveling with 'em . . . but you're not a true believer, are you?"

"Is it that obvious?"

"Like the nose on your face. Knew it the moment you walked into town. Everyone else kept quiet, like a herd of goats following the Judas ram. You're the only one who spoke up."

"I'm their guide. Sort of a job, y'know. I don't . . ."

"That's your business, friend." Thompson held up a hand. "I don't care why you've fallen in with these characters. What I want to know is, why did Castro send you my way?"

"I've told you everything I know." I sat down in the other chair. "If it makes any difference, it was a surprise to me, too."

"Oh, it makes a difference." He pulled out a penknife, flicked it open, and idly began to trim his fingernails. "We've got about thirty people living here, and every one of them came from Shuttlefield. My wife and I, along with the boys, were aboard the *Glorious Destiny*. When we saw what that bitch Hernandez had in mind, we grabbed what we could and took off. Started out with just one cabin, but it wasn't long before others followed us."

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"From other ships?"

"Uh-huh. The ones who managed to get away, that is. We've built this place from scratch, and put in the ferry late last summer. At first it was just so we could go hunting on the other side of the channel, but every so often someone shows up who wants to get over to Midland . . . usually folks like you, fed up with Shuttlefield. Until now, though, we thought the Union was unaware of our existence. . . ." He let out his breath. "And now you tell us that Manny Castro not only knows we're here, but he's even willing to provide exact directions."

"Maybe he doesn't consider you a threat."

"Maybe." Thompson silently regarded me for a few moments, as if trying to decide whether to trust me. Then he leaned back in his chair to open a crate behind him, pulling out a ceramic jug. Pulling off the cork, he passed it to me. "Bearshine," he murmured. "Sort of like whiskey, but distilled from corn mash. Be careful, it's got a kick. Don't worry, you won't go blind."

He was right about the kick. I could have started a fire with this stuff. The booze scorched my throat but made a nice warm place in my stomach. "Like it?" he asked. "Now ask yourself, how would we be able to make corn liquor when we can't grow any corn here?"

I thought about it for a moment. "You're getting it in trade."

"Sure we are. And they grow corn in Liberty. That's not where this comes from, though." He nodded in the general direction of the channel. "We're getting it from over there, from people who sometimes come back across. But I haven't carried any corn on my ferry."

"And you just said you've been running the ferry since only late last summer."

"Uh-huh. That's right." He tapped the jug with his knife. "So where do you think this stuff is coming from?"

I realized what he was getting at. "The original colonists."

"Yup." He nodded. "You say you're their guide. I take it that means you have a map. Are you carrying it now?"

I reached into my parka, pulled out the map we had been using. Thompson moved the jug aside as I spread it across the table. "Okay," he said, pointing to our location on the east coast of New Florida, "here's where we are, and over there is where we'll put you off tomorrow morning." His finger traced down the rocky western coast of Midland. "There's a place about a mile south where you can climb up the bluffs . . . don't worry, you can't miss it. At the top of the ridge, you'll find a path leading southwest."

"Where does it go?"

"When my boys and I hacked it out, it went back about thirty miles. Haven't been down it lately, so I don't know if it's been expanded since then. But here's the important part." He pointed farther inland to a highland region that covered most of the subcontinent. "That's the Gillis Range, with Mt. Shaw down here. From what I've been told . . . and believe me, it ain't much . . . somewhere on the other side of Mt. Shaw is where the *Alabama* crew is holed up."

Like most maps of Coyote, this one wasn't very detailed; it had been

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made from high orbit photos, and 95 percent of the planet hadn't been explored, let alone named. It appeared, though, that the Gillis Range split in half at its southern end, with a waterway forming a broad river valley between Mt. Shaw and another mountain to the southeast. It would make sense that the original colonists would settle in here: a source of fresh water and plenty of land, but protected on three sides by high terrain.

"I see." I traced my finger around the southern edge of the range. "So all we'd have to do is hike around Mt. Shaw. . . ."

"Uh-uh. Think again." Thompson pointed from the East Channel to the base of the mountain. "That's about a hundred and fifty miles. It's flat country, more or less, so you can make it in about a week, maybe two weeks. But if you decide to go all the way around the range, then come up the valley, that's going to be . . . what? Another two hundred, maybe three hundred miles?"

"I guess. We can make it."

"You guess?" Thompson raised his eyes from the map. "Let me remind you of something . . . we're halfway through Machidiel, which means we're coming into spring. The boids will start migrating north pretty soon, and the lowlands are their stomping ground. And I notice your people aren't carrying any firearms."

He was right; I hadn't considered this. Almost four hundred miles across uncharted terrain, with nothing more than quarter-staffs for protection . . . useless against a creature capable of ripping your head off with one swipe of its beak. Not only that, but we carried precious little food. We might be able to forage for a while, but the longer we stayed out in the open, the less chance we'd have of survival.

"Someone must have made it. How else would you be getting this?"

Thompson smiled. "That's what I figure." He pointed to Mt. Shaw. "If there's a new trail, then it must lead straight over the mountain. And even if there isn't one, it's the most direct route, and it'll cut a couple hundred miles off your trip."

I stared at the map. There was no indication of how tall the mountain was, or how steep its incline might be. Yet Clark Thompson had a good point; if we could make it across Mt. Shaw, then we'd come down into the valley where the *Alabama* colonists were likely to be hiding. It was a risk, to be sure, but it was the best shot we had.

"Thanks." I picked up the jug, took another slug of bearshine. "What do I owe you for this?"

Thompson sat back in his chair, thought about it for a moment. "If you make it, come back sometime and tell me."

"So you'll know where you're getting your booze from?"

"No," he said quietly. "So I'll know that there is indeed a God, and that She looks out for holy fools."

The ferry was a raft comprised of several blackwood logs lashed together, with a rotary wrench from a rover mounted in its center. A thick cable made of coiled tree vine was stretched all the way across the East Channel, anchored to boulders on either side of the river; it fed through

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the wrench, and when Lars and Garth stood on either side of the raft and turned the crank hand-over-hand, the raft was slowly pulled across the channel. It may not have been the quickest or easiest way of getting across the East Channel, but it was the safest; the ferry was located about fifteen miles north of the channel's most narrow point, and the swift current could easily sweep small boats downstream.

Clark Thompson may have been sympathetic to us, but he was also a pragmatic businessman. It took three round trips to get everyone to Midland, and it cost us six of our tents and three data pads; he already had enough lanterns and warm clothes. Yet he was generous enough to supply us with some dried fish, and he slipped me a jug of bearshine when no one was looking. I shook hands with him and he wished me good luck; the last I saw of him, he was standing on the wharf, watching us go.

By the time the Universalists were all on the far side of the channel, the day was more than half-over. Following Clark's instructions, I led them down the stony beach until we reached a place where a landslide had occurred long before, opening a narrow ravine in the limestone bluffs. A long, steep climb upward through the breach, and we came out on top of a high ridge. Behind and below us lay the East Channel . . . and before us stretched Midland, a vast savannah leading to forest, the Gillis Range visible in the distance as a ragged purple line across the horizon.

Once I found the trailhead Clark had told me about, I sat down on a boulder, spread the map across my lap and pulled out the compass. Once I had my bearings, I put everything back in my pocket, shouldered my pack once more, and began to lead the others down the hillside.

Everyone was happy; I remember that clearly. We'd made our escape from New Florida; the day was bright and warm, the road ahead clear and easy to follow. The Universalists began singing "God of Our Fathers" almost as soon as we reached the bottom of the ridge; I joined in even though I didn't know the words. And most of all, I remember Grier. She walked a few steps behind Zoltan, but whenever I looked back at her it was as if she were right beside me; the smile never left her face, and her eyes were as bright as the day we'd first met. After a while, Zoltan permitted her to join me; together we marched into the wilderness, two lovers with nothing before us save the brightest of futures.

It was a wonderful moment, one I'll never forget or regret. And like all wonderful moments, it didn't last very long. A pleasant dream, with the nightmare soon to follow.

New Florida, for the most part, was flat terrain, wide-open grasslands laced by streams, interspersed by swamps and occasional woods. During winter, when the ground was frozen and the swamps were dry, you could walk across it with relatively little effort.

Midland wasn't like that. By the end of the third day, we'd left the savannah and entered a vast rainforest that gradually became more dense, with faux-birch and spider-bush disappearing beneath a canopy of trees of a kind we'd never seen before, somewhat resembling elms except with thicker trunks and broader leaves, from which rough-barked vines dangled like serpents. Even in midday, sunlight seeped through only in

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sparse patches; it was cold down on the forest floor, the overgrowth brittle with frost.

We could no longer see the mountains; it wasn't long before we could no longer see the sun, and, on the fourth day, we lost the trail itself. I don't know whether we'd taken a wrong turn or if the trail simply ended; I only know that, in a moment of clarity, I came to the realization that the path had simply vanished. We doubled back, losing an hour in our effort to retrace our steps, but the trail was no longer there. All we had left was the map and the compass I carried in my pocket; without them, we would have been completely lost.

Day in and day out, we fought our way through the forest, using quarter-staffs to hack our way through dense foliage. At night, we huddled together against the cold; the dead branches we found were either frozen or too rotted to be burned, so what little warmth we got was from setting fire to small piles of twigs and leaves. No longer having as many tents as we once had, we were forced to double-up in our sleeping arrangements, with four or five people crammed together into tents meant for three. At least it helped keep us warm; Grier and I learned how to zip our bags together, and we went to sleep with our arms around each other, jostled by others sharing our tent.

Yet Zoltan always claimed a tent for himself, in order for him to continue his daily communion with God. He may have had some interesting chats with the Lord during that time, but if he had, he wasn't sharing what he'd learned with us; less frequently, he invited others to join him. He became silent, rarely speaking to anyone. He ceased leading us in prayer in the morning, and, after a week or so, he neglected to offer prayer in the evening as well. By then, the hymns had stopped. Ian and Renaldo got into a fistfight one morning over whose turn it was to carry a tent, and Clarice and Ana stopped speaking to one another over something that occurred when no one else was watching.

But the gradual disintegration of morale wasn't the worst, nor were the endless days of making our way through the rain forest, or even the cold. All this we might have been able to endure, were it not for one more thing.

Hunger.

When we'd set out from Shuttlefield, we'd brought as much food as we could carry on our backs, along with our tents, clothes, and sleeping bags. There were thirty-two of us—thirty-one, rather; as always, Zoltan never carried anything—so we were able to bring quite a lot of food, and we'd stocked up on more at Thompson's Ferry. I figured that, by the time we began to run low, we would be only a few days away from wherever the original colonists had settled, and then all we'd have to do was go on short-rations for a while. If worst came to worst, we could live off the land; a few of the native plants were edible, and I knew which ones they were.

What I didn't take into account was the fact that we were traveling through unknown territory in the dead of winter. First, we burned up a lot of calories, not just hiking but also keeping warm. We filled up at breakfast, then ate again at night: two meals a day for thirty people, not counting all the times when someone would nibble a biscuit or open a can of beans while we were taking rest breaks, and we used up our supplies

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very quickly. I didn't notice our rate of consumption at first, because my mind was focused on getting us through the forest, and I was also half-expecting Zoltan to do his part by keeping his people in line. But Zoltan said nothing, and almost two weeks went by before it hit me that our packs were getting lighter and we were leaving behind a trail of plastic wrappers and cans.

Second, none of the plants I'd learned how to eat on New Florida grew in the forests of Midland. Sourgrass, cloverweed, Johnson's thistle, faux-birch root . . . all were crowded out by the dense shrub that made up the undergrowth, and even those plants had gone into long-term dormancy. The streams and creeks where we might have found fish were frozen over, and any animals that we may have been able to trap were either in hibernation or had gone south for the winter. It was all we could do just to find dry wood for building fires.

Most of the Universalists were city people before they'd left Earth. They'd done pretty well so far, making their way through an alien jungle carrying forty or fifty pounds on their backs; their faith had supplied motivation where experience had failed. But by the time we'd stopped eating breakfast and were skimping on the evening meal, the base of Mt. Shaw was still a day away. Spirits were running low, and Zoltan was almost totally incommunicado.

Unless you've been there, you don't know what it's like to face slow starvation. I'm not talking about skipping a meal or two, or even fasting; I mean the desperation that comes with the realization that you're running out of food, and the knowledge that when it's gone, it may be a long time before you eat again. There was a hollow sensation in the pit of my stomach where there should have been the weight of food, and an invisible band had formed on either side of my skull, pressing in on my temples. We had to find something to eat, and soon.

Just before we reached Mt. Shaw, we came upon a low swamp. The ice was thin, so we had to detour around it, but then I noticed a small cluster of ball-plants growing on a tiny island in its center. I'd sooner throw a dead rat in a cook-pot than a swamper, but nonetheless they could be eaten, and they hibernated within ball-plants, so I drafted a couple of guys and we waded across the swamp, each footstep breaking through the ice and filling our boots with frigid slush, until we reached the island.

While the others waited behind me, I pulled out my knife and used it to cut open the thick leaves of the nearest plant. I intended to pull out a few sleeping swampers, then have the other guys club them to death. Skin 'em, stew 'em, eat 'em up . . . that was the plan.

What I'd neglected was the fact that pseudo-wasps sometimes hibernated inside the balls. It was one of the more interesting symbiotic systems that had evolved on Coyote: pseudo-wasps protected the ball-plants during summer, during which time they pollinated their flowertops; in late autumn, swampers curled up within the balls, and the pseudo-wasps retreated into their underground nests. Yet now and then, the odd pseudo-wasp or two would seek refuge within the ball-plants themselves, perhaps to ward off any predators who might try to get at the swampers.

That's what happened here. No sooner had I begun cutting my way into

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the nearest ball-plant when a pseudo-wasp, awakened by my knife, burred out of the incision I'd made. Before I could react, it alighted on the back of my left hand and stung me.

My hand swelled up, but that wasn't the worst of it. Pseudo-wasp venom contains a toxin somewhat similar to lysergic acid; it causes paralysis in other insects, but in humans it produces hallucinations. In Shuttlefield, there was even an underground trade in what was known as "sting"—venom extracted from pseudo-wasps that had been captured, then sold as a cheap high.

I've never been a doper, so I wasn't prepared for what happened next. Within a half-hour, colors began to get brighter as everything seemed to slow down; it seemed as if there was a subtle electric hum in the air, and nothing anyone said to me made any sense. By the time my companions helped me stagger out of the swamp, I was raving like a lunatic. I vaguely recall trying to take my clothes off, insisting that the perfect way to enjoy this lovely winter day was for everyone to get naked and have an orgy, swigging the bearshine Clark had given me, and telling Zoltan that he should use those wings of his to fly back to Thompson's Ferry and grab us a couple more jugs. Everything was happy and wonderful and exquisitely beautiful; these people were all my close friends, and it mattered little that we were lost and close to starvation.

At some point, though, my vision began to tunnel. Suddenly feeling very tired, I sat down on a log, saying that I needed to take a rest. Go ahead with the party, gang, I'll be along in just a moment. And then I passed out.

When I came to, I found myself in a tent. Night had fallen; I could smell the smoke of a campfire. From somewhere outside I could hear low voices. And I wasn't alone; in the soft glow of a lantern, Zoltan was seated cross-legged on the other side of the tent.

"Welcome back," he said. He had removed his robe, his wings furled about his shoulders. "We were worried about you. Feeling better?"

"A little." Not much. My head pounded, and my throat was parched. Without asking, he handed me a water bottle. I unscrewed the cap and drank. "Where are we? How far have we. . . ?"

"Where we were before you fainted." His face was hideous in the half-light; it had been a long time since I'd realized just how ugly he was. "We couldn't go any farther, not with you in this condition, so we stopped for the night."

"Oh, God . . . I'm sorry, I didn't mean to . . ."

"Don't be. It wasn't your fault." Zoltan took the bottle from me, replaced the cap. "In fact, I rather envy you. Seems to me that you've had a moment of revelation."

My mind was too fogged for me to realize what he was saying. "Yeah, well . . . getting stung will do that to you." My left hand was sore; it had been bandaged, and the swelling had gone down. There were antibiotics in the first-aid kit we were carrying; if this had happened to someone else, I might have been able to administer them in time to prevent the venom from taking effect. Unfortunately, these people didn't know much about pseudo-wasps. "My fault. I should have warned you."

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"Why? How can you warn someone about God?" Zoltan shook his head. "He does what He chooses to do, speaks to you when you least expect it."

"I don't understand."

"You know about the Holy Transformation. I must assume you do, because you've never asked me about it, not since the first night you spent with us. One of my followers must have told you . . . probably Grier, since you two have become close." I said nothing, and he went on. "When God came to me, while I was in the Room of Pain and Understanding, He told me that I had a mission in life. Gather as many as I could find who would believe His word and take them to another place, where we would spread the word that the Universal Transformation was forthcoming."

He shifted a little, stretching his legs. That was when I realized that he was naked. "I thought we'd receive that sign in Shuttlefield, but when it didn't happen and it became apparent that we were surrounded by those who'd eventually try to kill us, I realized that our mission would be fulfilled elsewhere. And so, like Moses and the Israelites, we've set forth into the wilderness . . . and now it's becomes clear to me what our purpose truly is, for through you, God has spoken."

"Zoltan . . . Reverend Shirow . . . I was stung by a pseudo-wasp. It makes people freak out, do weird things. That's all. I didn't hear God. I was just hallucinating."

"Perhaps you think you were suffering hallucinations. Yet during that time, you told us that you loved us all, that we should freely share our love with one another." I started to protest, but he held up a hand. "You say you were under the influence of the pseudo-wasp, and perhaps you were . . . but I think God was speaking through you."

"But I'm not a believer. I've told you. You've said it yourself."

"You've led us to this place, and God has spoken through you." He gazed at me with great tenderness, as if I was a lost child whom he had found. "I know now what He has planned for us," he said very quietly. "We are going to die here."

"No, we're not." I shook my head. "We're going to make it through this. We're going to get over that mountain, and then . . ."

"You can't refuse. It's God's will that we perish together. Perhaps not now, but soon, very soon." Zoltan took a deep breath, let it out as a sigh. "Benjamin, you're one of us now. The time has come for you to join us, body and soul."

He rose up on his haunches, and now I could see the erection between his legs. "Will you receive me?" he whispered. "Will you meditate with me?"

At this moment, I realized why he spent so much time in his tent. Why members of his congregation often joined him while he was in "meditation," why he discouraged sexual intercourse among his followers. It didn't matter whether they were male or female, young or old; Zoltan had brought them into his tent, told them what they wanted to hear, and then . . .

He reached for me, and I kicked him as hard as I could, swinging my right foot into his groin. Zoltan grunted and toppled over backward, clutching at himself, and I scrambled across the tent and unzipped the flap. I was almost halfway out of the tent when I felt his hand close

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around my left ankle. I blindly kicked back, felt the sole of my foot connect with something fleshy. Zoltan cried out in pain, and the people seated around the campfire looked around as I pitched forth on hands and knees from his tent.

I rose to my feet, wavered unsteadily, feeling the blood rush to my head. Someone said my name, and I saw Grier coming toward me. I didn't want her to touch me—I didn't want anyone to touch me—so I lurched away, escaping the fire and the tents, until I fell to my knees beneath a tree.

I tried to vomit, but there was nothing in my stomach for me to throw up; all I could do was dry-heave. When my guts stopped convulsing, I fell into a pile of dry leaves at the base. Darkness closed in and I was gone.

I awoke to find that someone had unrolled my sleeping bag and covered me with it. Probably Grier; she was the only person who acknowledged my presence that morning, and even *she* kept her distance. No one would speak to me; they quietly took down the tents and packed up their gear, treating me as if I was a guest who'd overstayed his welcome.

And perhaps I was. The map and compass were missing from my parka. Thinking they might have been taken from me while I was asleep, I asked the others who had them, only to receive stares and head-shakes as nonverbal responses. Although it was clear that Zoltan was now leading us through the forest, he didn't appear to have them either. It's possible that I might have lost them in the swamp, but when I attempted to go back to search for them, Zoltan beckoned for the others to come with him. So not only had I been ostracized, but the Universalists were willing to leave me behind. I had no choice but to follow them; shouldering my pack, I brought up the rear.

Even without the benefit of map and compass, though, Zoltan knew where he was going. At this point, it would have been difficult to miss finding the eastern slope of Mt. Shaw. By the end of the day, when we finally emerged from the forest, the mountain loomed before us, three thousand feet high, its summit still covered with snow. We made camp at its base, but no one invited me to share a tent with them. The only food left was some rice, but I wasn't offered any, and when I attempted to join the Universalists by the fire they'd built, Boris stepped in front of me, blocking my way with his staff. I retreated to where I had unrolled my sleeping bag and sat there alone, shivering in the cold, my stomach growling.

Shortly after everyone turned in for the night, though, Grier came to me. Glancing over her shoulder to see if anyone was watching, she knelt beside my sleeping bag, then reached beneath her robe and produced a bowl. "Eat fast," she whispered. "I can't let anyone see me doing this."

There was only a handful of rice in the bowl, but it was better than nothing. "Thanks," I mumbled, my teeth chattering as I took it from her. "You're . . ."

"Zoltan says you're no longer one of us. You refused to receive him when he offered his body to you. This makes you a heretic. We're not allowed to associate with you."

"That's what he says, huh?" I stuffed cold rice in my mouth. "And how many times have you had sex with him? Or have you lost count?"

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She let out her breath. "It's not like that, Ben. You might think it's sex, but it's really a form of communion. We receive the body of the prophet, and in this way we please not only him, but also . . ."

"Oh, come off it. There's nothing sacred about what he's doing. Zoltan wants to get his rocks off, that's fine, but leave God out of it. He's just using you for . . ."

"No! God has sent him to us to fulfill his mission . . ."

"And you know what Zoltan told me last night? He says he wants us all to die!" I was no longer bothering to keep my voice low. "This isn't communion. This isn't worship. You've been brainwashed, kid. He's going to . . ."

"Grier. Come away from him."

I looked up, saw Zoltan emerge from the shadows. How long he'd been standing there, I had no idea. His wings were hidden under his robe and I couldn't see his face beneath his upraised hood, yet in that moment, backlit against the dying campfire, he looked as demonic as anything Dr. Owen Dunn might have imagined in the depths of his insanity.

Grier started to rise, but I grabbed her wrist. "Don't listen to him," I said. "He's crazy, out of his mind. There's nothing he can do to you if you don't . . ."

"Grier, leave him." Zoltan remained calm. "We've known all along that he's an unbeliever. Now he's revealed himself to be more."

"What? A heretic? Just because I won't grovel?" I struggled to my feet, dropping the empty bowl but keeping my grip on Grier's wrist. "You're a pretty lousy excuse for a prophet, Shirow. Jesus would have been sick if he'd ever met you . . ."

"Enough!" Zoltan leveled a taloned finger at me. "Thou art damned! Thou art excommunicated! Thou art no longer of the body of the church!"

"Yeah. Right." I took a deep breath. From behind him, the other Universalists were emerging from their tents, drawn by the sound of our voices. "So I'm damned and excommunicated, and you'll never get me to . . ." I stopped, shook my head. "But I'm one thing you're not, Shirow, and the one thing you can't do without just now."

"And what's that?"

"I'm the only guy who knows how to get over that mountain."

He stared at me. "God will show us the way."

"Maybe I don't have the map and compass any more, but I don't think you do either, and I was the only one who was paying attention to where we were going while y'all were singing church hymns. Not only that, but Clark Thompson told *me* how to find the *Alabama* colonists, and not *you*. So unless God gives out travel plans, buddy, you're screwed."

I was bluffing, of course; Thompson's directions hadn't been specific. Not only that, but I was gambling that Zoltan hadn't stolen the map and compass from me. Yet I hadn't seen him or anyone else produce them all day, which led me to believe that they had been lost.

"You say you want to die out here." Desperate, I kept talking, trying to get through to them. "Great . . . so what's *that* going to prove? If no one knows why, then it'll all be for nothing . . . nothing! What sort of a holy mission is that, pal?"

Grier trembled against me; I released her wrist, but she didn't move

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away. No one said anything; they waited in silence for their prophet to denounce the heretic, the unbeliever, the damned soul who'd dared challenge God's chosen messenger to Coyote.

Zoltan said nothing for a few moments. He was stuck, and he knew it. "The Lord works in mysterious ways," he said at last. "You may lead us across the mountain, Benjamin."

"Thank you." I let out my breath, hesitated. "And in exchange for my services as your guide, there's one more thing I want from you."

"And this is. . . ?"

"Your tent, please. And without you in it." I bent down, gathered my bag and pack. "It's freezing out here, and I'm sure no one will object if you share space with them."

Zoltan didn't reply. He simply stepped aside. My arms full, I walked past him, ignoring his followers as I headed over to his tent.

Yet when I looked back, Grier wasn't with me. She had moved against his side, and he'd put his arms around her, and that was when I knew she was lost to me.

It took two days for us to climb Mt. Shaw. It should have taken only one, but the mountainside was steep. With no trail to follow, we had to pick our way around granite ledges and across landslides, taking a zigzag course up the eastern slope. The higher we went, the colder the air became, and soon every breath we took was painful. Once we passed the treeline, about three-quarters of the way up the mountain, we found ourselves plodding, sometimes crawling, through knee-deep drifts.

Everyone was weak from hunger and cold. When we stopped to make camp, there was no level place for us to pitch our tents, nor any dry wood to gather for a fire. We managed to boil the remaining rice in snow melted in a pan over a portable stove, but several people had come down with altitude sickness and couldn't eat. No one's clothes were dry, and some were showing the first signs of acute hypothermia. We spent a chilly night on the mountain, huddled together in our bags as the wind kicked up snow around us, Bear glaring down upon us like the eye of an angry deity.

When morning finally came, we discovered that Clarice was no longer among us. Renaldo found her ten feet away; sometime during the night, she had rolled down the slope in her sleeping bag until she landed in a deep snow drift. She was still alive, but only barely; her face was pale, her lips blue, and she never regained consciousness despite our attempts to keep her warm. Clarice died as Uma was rising over the summit; with the ground too hard for us to dig a grave and no one strong enough to carry her body, the only thing we could do was zip her corpse inside her bag and stack some rocks on top. Zoltan muttered a brief prayer, and then we continued our ascent, leaving her behind.

We reached the top of the mountain late in the afternoon the second day. The view was magnificent—a great valley several thousand feet below, surrounded by the Gillis Range with the mammoth volcanic cone of Mt. Bonestell far away to the northwest—but no one was in any condition to appreciate it. By now, several people were leaning heavily upon their

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staffs or each other, their feet numb from frostbite; Ian was snowblind, relying on Dex to lead him, and most of the others were listless and mumbling incoherently.

To make matters worse, thick clouds coming in from the northeast showed that a storm was approaching. We had to get off the summit as soon as we could. Still pretending that I knew the way, I made the best guess I could, then began leading the group down the western slope.

We made it to the treeline shortly after dusk, but still we couldn't find any place to set up our tents. The stronger members of the group erected a couple of lean-to shelters from fallen branches, then covered them with unfolded tents. Unable to build a fire, with nothing left to eat, we crowded together beneath the shelters as the first flakes of snow began to fall upon us. That night, even Bear had forsaken us; the sky was dark, the stars invisible behind the storm sweeping down the mountain.

No one spoke to me except when they had to. I was necessary, but that was all; any sense of brotherhood had long since vanished. Grier stayed away from me; that hurt the most, because although I had stopped caring very much about the rest of the group, I still loved her. But during that last, long night, even though she slept only a few feet away, she was as distant as if we were separated by miles.

By daybreak, though, the snow was still falling and the shelters were covered with nearly a foot of fresh powder. Three more people had died during the night: Boris, and two others whose names I can't recall today. Yet there was no way we could continue our descent; visibility had been reduced to less than five feet, and most of the group was suffering from frostbite and hypothermia.

That was when the true horror began.

"We have to eat." Zoltan said this as I was helping Renaldo drag the bodies from beneath the awnings. "If we don't eat, we'll die."

"Yeah, sure. No problem." I could barely see him through the snow; he was sitting on a log, staring at me. "Know just the place. Nice little café at the bottom of the mountain. Just a few miles away. Great prime rib. C'mon, let's go."

A bad joke. I couldn't help it. Four people dead already, and doubtless more to come. Ian most likely, or perhaps Doria; both were comatose, and there was nothing we could do to save them. Even another handful of rice sounded like a feast just then. But when I looked at him, I saw that he was gazing at the corpses in a way that made me feel uncomfortable.

"Put them over there," he said, pointing to a place nearby. "Get some knives." He looked at Renaldo. "See if you can find some dry wood. We need to make a fire."

"What are you saying?" I whispered

For several long moments, Zoltan didn't reply. "We need to eat," he said. "If we don't, we'll die."

"You told me God wants us to die," I said. "Isn't that your. . . ?"

And then he lifted his gaze, and in that instant I saw something in his eyes I'd never seen before . . .

No. That's not right. It had been there all along; I had just refused to ac-

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knowledge it, even though I knew it to be true. Zoltan Shirow was insane. He had always been insane. From the moment wings had been grafted to his back, he had been mad, and yet he had concealed it behind the veneer of presumed prophecy.

Cannibalism can be accepted if you're desperate to survive. Many have done it before in order to continue living, and more often than not they weren't crazy. As repulsive as it may be, it's a pragmatic choice; eat the dead and remain alive, or die yourself. Yet in that instant, looking into Zoltan's eyes, I realized that this was what he had had in mind all along. Given a choice, however, he would have preferred to taste my flesh than that of any of his followers, and he wasn't going to wait until I died of cold or starvation. This was why he'd let me remain with the group. I wouldn't take his body as communion, so he'd take mine. Don't ask me how I knew this; I just did.

"Okay," I said. "You're right. It's gotta be done." I turned to Renaldo. "You go get the knives . . . I think they're in Boris's bag. I'll get some wood."

Renaldo nodded dumbly. His mind was gone. He began trudging back through the snow toward the nearest lean-to. I watched him go, then I turned and started hobbling down the slope.

After the first few steps, I broke into a run. I had nothing with me except the clothes on my back and the boots I was wearing; no pack, no bag, no lantern, no stove. But if I returned to the shelter where I'd left all these things, I had little doubt that I'd never come out again.

And I didn't have Grier. I tried to forget this as I ran for my life.

I had almost made a clean getaway when I heard Zoltan call my name. I wanted to keep going, but something made me stop, look back around. Zoltan was still where I'd left him; he hadn't moved at all, making no effort to pursue me. A gargoyle crouching in the snow. He knew what I was doing.

"Benjamin," he said, his voice almost lost to me, "do you believe?"

I started to say something, but I didn't. Instead, I just kept running.

How I survived, I'll never know. By all rights, I should have perished on Mt. Shaw. I ate snow and the bark off trees, and slept covered by piles of dead leaves, and kept going downhill until I found my way to the bottom of the mountain, where the hunting party found me three days later. If Zoltan had been around, he might have said that what saved me was divine providence. Personally, I think it was fear, and the knowledge of what I'd left behind.

A doctor by the name of Kuniko Okada nursed me back to health. Two toes on my left foot had come down with gangrene due to frostbite, so she was forced to amputate them, but other than that and severe malnutrition I'd come through in relatively good shape. I remained in her care for the next week, until I was strong enough to get out of bed and hobble across her cabin with the aid of a walking stick, but it wasn't until Dr. Okada helped me out onto the porch that I discovered it was suspended fifteen feet above the ground.

The original colonists had built their new settlement within the boughs

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of an ancient stand of blackwood trees, not far from a wide creek that flowed down from the Gillis Range. Looking out from Dr. Okada's porch, I saw a village of treehouses, connected to one another by rope bridges, with livestock pens, brick kilns, and grain sheds scattered across the forest floor. I even saw the still where they made their bearshine. No wonder the Union hadn't been able to discover its location; the blackwoods not only provided protection against boids, but also camouflage from the cameras and infrared sensors of the spacecraft orbiting high above.

Once I was well, I agreed to meet with the Defiance town council. I recognized their leader as soon as I walked into the room: Robert E. Lee, former captain of the URSS *Alabama*, the man who'd stolen Earth's first starship and brought a group of political dissidents to the new world. His hair and beard had grown iron-gray, lending him a strong resemblance to his famous ancestor, but he was clearly the same man whose face I'd seen in history texts when I was growing up. Lee was almost as surprised to see me as I was surprised to meet him, as were the other members of the council; although I wasn't the first Shuttlefield refugee who'd managed to find his way to Defiance, I was the only man who'd ever crossed Mt. Shaw during winter. Not only that, but apparently I'd done it on my own, with only the clothes on my back.

I had a little trouble telling them my story; the form of English they spoke was over two hundred years old, and only recently had they learned Anglo. Once we were past the language barrier, I informed them that they were only half-right; I hadn't been alone, but so far as I knew there were no other survivors. Lee and the others listened to my story, and when I was done they excused me in order to hold an executive session. It didn't last long; when I was brought back into the meeting room, Lee told me that the council had voted unanimously to accept me as a new member of their town. I accepted the invitation, of course.

A month later, I was able to walk on my own. By then, it was early spring; the snow had melted, and it was possible to climb Mt. Shaw safely once more. I took a few days off from my new job as goat-herder to escort a small group of men up the western slope. It was a slow ascent—I had to stop often to rest my left foot, and also try to remember the way I'd come—but after a couple of days of searching we managed to find the place just below the treeline where I'd last seen the members of the Church of Universal Transformation.

Two lean-to shelters, already on the verge of collapse, lay near a ring of stones where a fire had been built. Within them, we discovered rotting sleeping bags and backpacks, tattered robes and dead lanterns, a couple of Bibles whose brown pages fluttered in the cool wind. Charred and broken bones lay in and around the firepit; not far away, we found a pile of mutilated skeletons, some missing their arms and legs, others with skulls fractured as if struck from behind by one of the staffs that lay here and there.

There was no way to identify anyone. Weather, animals, and insects had done their work on the bodies, and I couldn't look for myself. After a few minutes, I kneeled on the ground and wept until one of my companions picked me up and led me away.

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I'm sure none of them survived. There's no way anyone else could have made it off the mountain. Not even Grier. Even today, her fate is something I can't bear to contemplate.

And yet. . . .

Before my partners buried them, they carefully counted the corpses. They came up with twenty-eight bodies. Not counting Clarice, whose body was left on the other side of Mt. Shaw, or myself, that's two short of the thirty-one Universalists who left Shuttlefield, including Zoltan Shirow. And they never found anything that looked like a wing, or a skull with fangs among its teeth, or a hand whose fingers had been reshaped as talons.

To this day, though, people who've ventured into the Gillis Range have come back with stories of shadowy forms half-seen through the trees. Sometimes they've caught a glimpse of a figure with bat-like wings, and sometimes they've spotted what appears to be a young woman. These could only be stories; the mountains are haunted, and lonely as only the wilderness can be.

I don't know the answer to this. But every night, before I go to bed, I pray to God that I never will. O

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On Books

Paul Di Filippo

Introduction

Over fifty "alternative press" volumes have surged onto my overflowing shelves since the last time I dedicated a full column to the noble efforts of the micro-publishers. We might not get to all of them this time around, but here's a sampling.

Novels and Novellas

The new reissue of Rudy Rucker's *The Hacker and the Ants* (Four Walls Eight Windows, trade paper, $13.95, 308 pages, ISBN 1-56858-247-1) bears the subheading "Version 2.0," and as Rucker explains in his preface, this tale of Jerzy Rugby, Silicon Valley genius-nerd, and his dealings with a troublesome digital insect horde has been extensively updated and retooled for the twenty-first century. I loved this book on its first go-round, and can only believe it's an even finer work after Rucker's new additions.

PS Publishing maintains its high standards for novellas with three recent superb additions to its list. (All are available in deluxe limited hardcovers as well as the paperback versions.) First up is Stephen Baxter's *Riding the Rock* (trade paper, $14.00, 61 pages, ISBN 1-902-880-59-5). Part of his famed Xeelee cycle of stories, this tale reminds me of recent work by Adam Roberts in its concern with child warriors in an exotic future war setting. Like *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) as reinterpreted by Cordwainer Smith, Baxter's book conveys the illimitable insanity of warfare on a galactic scale. Geoff Ryman's *V.A.O.* (trade paper, $14.00, 67 pages, ISBN 1-902-880-48-X) strikes me as a bit of a change of pace for him. Concerned with the plight of the elderly in the near-future (a topic not often addressed in SF, save by a few visionaries such as Tiptree and James Gunn), this fast-moving, slangy caper begs for filming. If only Alec Guinness were still around to take the lead role of Alistair Brewster, hacker with a heart of gold. Finally, in *Firing the Cathedral* (trade paper, $14.00, 112 pages, ISBN 1-902-880-44-7), Michael Moorcock brilliantly reinvents his sixties icon Jerry Cornelius yet again, presenting us with the perfect commentator on and participant in the follies of a new century. As time, space, and personality warp and deform, and a million catastrophes reveal their underlying similarities, Cornelius blithely assembles his posse of meta-slackers for a bit of all right. And the introduction by comics god Alan Moore is just dazzling.

Fresh off the tremendous success of *City of Saints and Madmen* (2002), which chronicled the eerie burg of Ambergris, the miraculous Jeff VanderMeer gifts us with the creation of another surrationally bizarre urban locale, one named Veniss. In *Vennis Underground* (Prime, trade paper, $15.00, 188 pages, ISBN 1-894815-64-5; mass-

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market, $5.99, 240 pages, ISBN 1-894815-44-0), VanderMeer brings us to a far-future setting, where the titular city lies surrounded by a dys-ecological wasteland. Life in Veniss is fairly attractive and tolerable for most. But beneath the isolated refuge lie thirty levels of a Dantean hell, ruled over by the enigmatic "bioneer" and master of the Living Art, Quin, a realm known as Quin's Shanghai Circus (a tribute to the understated fantasies of writer Edward Whittemore). Into this nighted realm will plunge three people: the twins Nicholas and Nicola, and Nicola's lover, Shadrach. Told from all three points of view, the novel eventually comes to center on Shadrach in his Orphic journey to rescue Nicola from the clutches of Quin. Rife with more startling biomorphic inventions than a dozen iterations of Cordwainer Smith's "A Planet Named Shayol," this thrilling, poetic tale resonates most closely with Richard Calder's *Malignos* (2000), and is fully as affecting. Whether witnessing Shadrach dropping through levels of Hell with a parachute or trading insults with the severed head of an assassin "meerkat," you will have to prop up your dropped jaw more than once.

Thanks to the good offices of SF author Warren Wagar, I came into possession of Eduard Prugovecki's *Dawn of the New Man* (Xlibris, trade paper, $26.99, 506 pages, ISBN 1-4010-4547-2), and am grateful for the chance to have read this rather old-fashioned but stimulating Utopian novel. Prugovecki is a scientist by trade, a quantum physicist in fact, yet his writing is far from ham-handed. Solid if a tad ungainly prose wraps the tale of a sleeper awakened. Genius playboy physicist Dr. Philip Deron sleeps for 350 years, entering a future where two rival polities—Terra and the FWF—dominate an Earth slowly recovering from the Last War. Terra is a near-paradise, run as a kind of consensual anarchy made possible by various new mental disciplines, while the FWF is an extension of all that is most reprehensible about our current Western capitalist societies. Deron's initial acclimation to his new world was laid out in *Memoirs of the Future* (2001). Neatly prologued with backstory, this volume finds the conflict between the rival camps coming to a head, with Deron playing a major role in the battle. Combining the heady didacticism of Wells with the sometimes wacky sexual-philosophical stylings of van Vogt, this novel deals with important issues in a intermittently stodgy but always interesting fashion.

The latest curious instance of a book without a single preternatural event, yet which nonetheless reads as the most outrageous fantasy, comes from Big Engine. Tom Arden's *Shadow Black* (trade paper, £9.99, 299 pages, ISBN 1-903468-05-1) is nearly as splendid a confection as its recent literary cousin, Edward Carey's *Observatory Mansions* (2000). To the weird British country manor named Shadow Black comes young Harriet Locke, on a surprise visit to her fiancé, Mark Vardell. Vardell is a guest at Shadow Black, hired to paint a portrait of Lord Harrowblest, the crippled owner. Unfortunately, Vardell is also sleeping with Yardley Urban, Lady Harrowblest, a retired, but still alluring, Hollywood starlet. Harriet's arrival naturally introduces certain complica-

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tions into this arrangement. But the manor's bizarre population of servants and hangers-on constitutes a web of equal intrigue. Toss in the squatters at a nearby abandoned resort and a missing heir, and you have as tangled a plot as you could wish. That one of the Harrowblest lodgers is a young SF fan named Toby allows Arden to introduce many absurdist Kilgore-Trout-style pulp interludes as well. If Daphne Du Maurier had collaborated with John Cleese to script a year's worth of *Fawlty Towers* shows, the result might have approached the daft Gothic hilarity of this book, which is also not without its surprisingly acute moments: "In all public lavatories there is a quality of horror: a suggestion of the chasms beneath the communal life, of weakness, of failure, of the squalors of the body, of the vanity of our pretensions, of the imminence of death."

The Cleansing (Arkham House, hardcover, $32.95, 319 pages, ISBN 0-87054-181-1) is John D. Harvey's debut novel about the eruption into mortal affairs of Wanata, an avenging Indian demigod intent on exterminating mankind for our ecological sins. Manifesting in Alaska in the form of a supernatural wolf, Wanata and his pack of natural wolves wreak havoc, only to find his lupine jihad detoured by the efforts of an Indian sage named Laughing Wolf and a reporter named Savannah Channing. Written in vigorous if occasionally goofy prose, boasting numerous bite-sized sections (some only a single sentence long), this book resembles nothing so much as a quintessential 1950's B&W horror film, one with the inevitable presence of actor John Agar. Despite contemporary references (the critic wonders, however, whether a mention of Andrew Dice Clay truly qualifies as *au courant*) and some over-the-top violence and a dab of sex, Harvey's book conjures up a mental movie of buzz-cut generals striving to understand the wolf invasion while the feisty gal reporter (Noel Neill?) risks all for her scoop. Two sequels are planned.

Ever since the untimely death of Kathy Acker, experiments in form and voice and subject matter in the speculative genre have been all too rare. Luckily for us, however, a few brave authors remain willing to push ahead into uncharted literary territory. One of the finest is Lance Olsen, who now gives us a novel that is almost an epic poem. *Girl Imagined by Chance* (FC2, trade paper, $13.95, 328 pages, ISBN 1-57366-103-1) concerns a middle-aged couple who in a kind of brilliant and perverse *folie à deux* summon into existence a fetus named Genia. As the nameless husband (who seems to be narrating in a kind of incantatory fugue state, although in the second person) and his wife Andi begin to elaborate the ghost daughter's future life and personality, their friends and acquaintances are caught up in this neurotic whirlpool. Contoured around a series of B&W photos, the chapters drift and glide like a Miles Davis solo through any number of fascinating riffs, mainly on the meaning of photography and identity. With its autobiographical component (Olsen's wife is indeed named Andi, and they live in Idaho, as do the protagonists) and unconventional structure, this quietly powerful book reads like a blend of the work of Italo Calvino and Michael Blumlein.

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Single-Author Collections

A peyote prospector who falls in love with a strange cactus. A world where all life rides a bizarre roller-coaster of evolution/devolution. A society based on teleportation and shame. A lonely man who loves so much he brutalizes the very object of his affections. A blocked artist who finds the solution to his problems in a Renaissance myth. These are simply a few of the marvels on display in *Bright Segment: Volume VIII of the Complete Stories of Theodore Sturgeon* (North Atlantic Books, hardcover, $35.00, 408 pages, ISBN 1-55643-398-0). Although not containing perhaps so many acknowledged classics as some of the earlier collections, this latest installment does not lack in immense reading pleasures. Despite the period represented being a tough one for Sturgeon (his artistic frustrations are brilliantly encapsulated in "To Here and the Easel"), none of these stories is less than technically adroit and heartfelt, and many of them are brilliant and shattering. Even the O. Henry ending of "Twink" can be forgiven, since, as Sturgeon remarks, he only pulled this stunt once. One curious benefit of reading an author's stories in this compact chronological manner is to see dominant tics and riffs prominently displayed. The fact that three men in three tales punch in the faces of the women they ostensibly love is disturbing, even given period mores, but no one ever claimed Sturgeon was a saint, just a brilliant writer. As always, this volume has been scrupulously and lovingly assembled and annotated by Paul Williams, who deserves some kind of medal or lifetime annuity.

Alert readers of this magazine won't need to be informed about the attractions of Kage Baker's "Company" stories. Like Fritz Leiber's *Change War* cycle or Poul Anderson's *Time Patrol* books, Baker's tales of the mysterious firm known as Dr. Zeus, Inc., and its era-hopping operatives combine the best of historical fiction with the cognitive dissonance and paradox-filled estrangement that SF fans relish. Add a dash of the amoral protagonists from C.L. Moore's "Vintage Season" and you have a tasty recipe. Now, fourteen of these stories are collected in *Black Projects, White Knights* (Golden Gryphon Press, hardcover, $24.95, 288 pages, ISBN 1-930846-11-8). Eleven of them hail from *Asimov's*, while three have never before seen print, making this a must-have volume for Baker's fans. Among the new gems, my favorite is "The Queen in Yellow," wherein we find the famous archaeologist Flinders Petrie most disconcerted while on an Egyptian dig by a fellow who knows much more than he should about the contents of a three-thousand-year-old tomb.

Another name that resonates loudly in the pages of this magazine (and across the SF world) is James Patrick Kelly. His new collection, *Strange But Not A Stranger* (Golden Gryphon, hardcover, $25.95, 297 pages, ISBN 1-930846-12-6) is if anything even stronger than his previous *Think Like a Dinosaur* (1997). From the retro-redolent, Hugo-winning "10^{16} to 1," which opens the volume, to the far-future, mind-blowing "Undone," which closes it, Kelly is relentless in his noble, impossible pursuit of the quintessential SF story. (Not to mention essaying the occasional ghost story and fantasy as well.) Whatever its surprising premise or unforeseen

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modes, a Kelly story can be recognized by meticulously hewn prose that sings, a wry humor, affection for the cast assembled, and a determination to explore every aspect of an idea. As the title of this collection hints, Kelly makes his readers feel at home in marvelous places they've never imagined.

In the year 2000, readers in the UK had the pleasure of enjoying a story collection by M. John Harrison, *Travel Arrangements*. We here in the U.S. could only look on jealously. But now it's our turn to gloat. Nightshade Press has just released (in simultaneous trade paper and hardcover) Harrison's *Things That Never Happen* (trade paper, $15.00, 449 pages, ISBN 1-892389-33-9), and what a treasure trove it is. For the price of the U.K. collection, you get all fourteen stories, plus ten more, plus a smashing introduction by China Miéville, plus story notes by Harrison. All this just in time to companion Harrison's epic space opera, *Light*. In Harrison's melancholy, meaning-saturated universe, a Lovecraftian unease finds expression in conceits worthy of Borges or Kafka. Wounded, untrustworthy narrators penetrate the thin curtain that separates consensus reality from a primordial chaos, and, if they survive, are never the same. In a piece like "Running Down," where the unfortunate Lyall emanates entropy, to the ruination of himself and his few friends, we have a metaphor for the way in which all of us often manage to bruise and crush what we cherish. Yet Harrison's work is not without its black humor. I maintain that to characterize a doomed soul by saying "He wept easily at Japanese films" is to offer the saving chuckle that will see us through all tragedies.

The most marvelous thing about Zoran Zivkovic's surreal storytelling is the tone and voice of his tales. He's able to capture perfectly the same sense of plausible absurdity that Kafka and Borges also specialized in, and to create narrators who blithely fall into the all the odd traps of life without ever fussing about the improbability of what's happening to them. Oh, the hapless folks in a Zivkovic story might be startled or have questions, but they always plunge ahead gamely with their odd fates. In the six stories contained in *The Library* (Publishing Atelier Polaris, trade paper, $10.00, 133 pages, ISBN 86-83741-95-2), we meet a man who finds his future career outlined for him ("Virtual Library"); another who is on the receiving end of an infinite flow of books ("Home Library"). We learn of the "Night Library," which boasts the biographies of everyone who has ever lived; and we see what Hell holds for non-bookish types in "Infernal Library." "The Smallest Library" is the obverse of "Home Library," where a single book becomes infinite; and "Noble Library" draws all the threads together in fine metafictional fashion. Throughout all these calamities visited upon fussy souls, we are guided by Zivkovic's sure hand and deadpan wit, and by the fine translation rendered by Alice Copple-Tosic.

On the basis of *Lord Stink and Other Stories* (Small Beer Press, chapbook, $5.00, 76 pages, ISBN unavailable), Judith Berman is a skillful, passionate writer who proceeds at her own measured pace to produce quality craftsmanship from her workshop. Two stories here, the title piece and "Dream of Rain" are mythic, fairytale-like fantasies that evoke the best of Ursula Le Guin.

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The heretofore unpublished "Election Day," by contrast, is a madcap Tim-Powersish romp involving talking mirrors, reanimated corpses and a touchingly awkward, nascent love affair. Finally, "The Window" moves into Carol Emshwiller territory with its tale of an Earth overrun by the Grubs, and how humanity fares as pets. Berman exhibits a sure hand and a sharp imagination. Seeing more of her work will be a pleasure, especially at possibly longer lengths.

I'm coming later than I could have wished to Keith Brooke's excellent collection from 2001, *Head Shots* (Cosmos Books, trade paper, $15.00, 162 pages, ISBN 1-58715-387-4). But since *Head Shots* is a print-on-demand publication, it's eternally available in virginal incarnations for your reading pleasure. And pleasure you will indeed experience. Brooke's stories reflect a sprawling talent, one that can create Zelazny-worthy tales like "Hotrider," or Silverbergian excursions like "Queen Bee," or surreal fables like "Skin." Without being pretentious or flashy, Brooke deploys his solid, intriguing, state-of-the-art prose in orderly fashion to get each different job done. The results are stories you won't soon forget. The opener, "Witness," is one of the best far-future idylls I've seen in a long time. This collection is surely one of the essential volumes for the new century.

The subtitle to Richard Parks's *The Ogre's Wife* (Obscura Press, trade paper, $18.95, 280 pages, ISBN 0-9659569-5-4) is "Fairy Tales for Grownups," and the stories therein fill that description admirably. Deceptively simple, earnest, and tragicomic, Parks's tales convey deep truths beneath narratives that tumble along like limpid streams. Whether exploring Oriental mythologies, as in "A Place to Begin" and "Golden Bell, Seven, and the Marquis of Zeng" or creating Dunsanyian wonderlands as in "How Konti Scrounged the World," Parks delivers stories that are rooted very tangibly in specific times and places, yet which are underpinned by eternal issues. I particularly enjoyed the trio of stories—"Wrecks," "The God of Children," and "A Respectful Silence"—which deal with scientific ghostbuster Eli Mothersbaugh. Parks's gift for close-up characterization stands him in good stead throughout.

Anthologies

Although first published in 1999, *New Mythos Legends* (Marietta Publishing, trade paper, $15.99, 271 pages, ISBN 1-892669-19-6) is just now out in a less expensive incarnation, and reveals itself as a bargain for lovers of things HPL-ish. A strong roster of authors—Hugh Cave, Jeffrey Thomas, Tom Piccirilli, Norman Partridge—undertake to alarm us across many milieus with both canonical and revisionist interpretations of the Chthulu Mythos. Old specters like the Hounds of Tindalos reappear (Stephen Mark Rainey's "The Fire Dogs of Balustrade"), while fresh ones (the psychic vampires of Del Stone's "Feeders") emerge. The ever-reliable Don D'Ammassa offers some fine shivers with his spectral, oblivious "masters of the world" in "Dominion." Editor/publisher Bruce Gehweiler has done a fine job on this volume, and his Marietta Publishing also boasts a full line of other worthy titles.

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Be warned: reading *Tourniquet Heart* (Prime, trade paper, $15.00, 235 pages, ISBN 1-894815-10-6) will probably be enough to put you off thoughts of romance for a long time. Editor Christopher Teague has assembled a thematic anthology intended to reveal "the darker, twisted, *nastier* side of affection," and has certainly succeeded. Lovers come to three dozen ghastly ends, and the cumulative effect, as with Teague's earlier venture, *Nasty Snips* (1999), is somewhat wearyingly splatterrific. Nonetheless, his ambition and editorial competence have turned up such gems as Christopher Fowler's for-want-of-a-nail-structured "The Arousal Carousel," Steve Rasnic Tem's geriatrically macabre "This Thing Called Love," and Thomas Roche's "Enabling Belle," which amazingly makes the reader believe an act of necrophilia could be heroic!

Much more to my taste is the stellar anthology *Keep Out the Night* (PS Publishing, hardcover, $65.00, 248 pages, ISBN 1-902880-55-2), brilliantly ushered into print by editor Stephen Jones. Inspired by a dozen classic horror anthologies issued in the UK in the thirties and collectively known as the "Not at Night" series, Jones has revived the concept of seeking out rarities from a select group of authors and wrapping them in informative introductions. The cast—in this first of what portends to be many such volumes—consists of Sydney Bounds, Poppy Brite, Ramsey Campbell, Hugh Cave, Basil Copper, Dennis Etchison, Neil Gaiman, Caitlin Kiernan, Tim Lebbon, Brian Lumley, Kim Newman, and Michael Marshall Smith. Many of the stories here are seeing only their second appearance ever (Cave's has lain dormant for sixty-five years till now!), and yet they're all of remarkably high quality. Literate, restrained, genuinely terrifying, they make picking a favorite impossible. This collection, though priced high to reflect its limited production run, will repay all readers tenfold.

The shaping hands of Lucinda Ebersole and Richard Peabody have opened the taps of superb writing in *Gargoyle 45* (Paycock Press, trade paper, $10.00, 162 pages, ISBN 0-931181-11-9). Some of the contributions are even speculative in nature, but none of them will you regret reading. Among the more fantasticated pieces are Sharon Krinsky's poem "Things to Do in an Edward Hopper Painting," which invites the reader to step into many canvases; Kyle Conwell's "An Underdeveloped Picture of my Brother," which tells of the fierce emotional bond between a man and his dog who is more than a dog; Amy Eller Lewis's "The Double Life of Evelyn Gray," wherein a woman confronts her doppelgänger; and finally David Schneiderman's "Tupeat, Frompeet, Repeit," a metafictional romp across linguistic landscapes.

What do you get when you combine the editorial genius of *Back Brain Recluse's* Chris Reed with that of Wordcraft's David Memmott? Only one of the best original anthologies of the year. *Angel Body and Other Magics for the Soul* (trade paper, $16.95, 192 pages, ISBN 1-877655-39-2) features mainly writers who have long been associated with Wordcraft, in a tribute to that press's twenty years of accomplishments. Just off the top, we find Don Webb depicting the defiance of a Black Magic martyr in "Afterward." "Burrito Meltdown" is a zesty Ishmael-Reed-

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style concussion bomb by Ernest Hogan. Conger Beaseley's "The Man Who Adopted Dead Children" out-Poes old Edgar. And Scott Edelman's "Choosing Time" adapts choose-your-own-adventure format to a sophisticated tale of a housewife's escape from angst into a wide-open future. A rich assortment of poetry supplements the outstanding fiction nicely.

Miscellaneous Titles

What range of colors would you pick to illustrate the story of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde in graphic novel form? Most likely, a palette of grays and umbers and bilious greens and splashes of blood-red. But that's the clichéd take on this tale, as you'll discover in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (NBM, hardcover, $15.95, 64 pages, ISBN 1-56163-330-5). Artist Lorenzo Mattotti—working from a tight, taut script by Jerry Kramsky—employs brilliant stained-glass oranges, blues, yellows, and greens to produce a giddy, effervescent, Weimar version of Stevenson's famous parable. The George Grosz stylings are the perfect revisionist makeover, causing the reader to marvel at this tale of the duplicitous nature of mankind all over again.

Also from NBM comes another in the marvelous "Cities of the Fantastic" series by Francois Schuiten and Benoit Peeters. (See my earlier review of their *Brusel*.) *The Invisible Frontier* (hardcover, $15.95, 63 pages, ISBN 1-56163-333-X) is set at an imperial cartographic center that takes the form of a huge many-storied dome in the middle of a desert. Our protagonist, the newly adult yet still vaguely Harry-Potterish Roland de Cremer, finds himself the novice on the staff, and experiences various bizarre yet familiar transitional difficulties. On the point of finally feeling at home, Roland finds his tenuous foundations undermined by a visit from the imperial ruler, who mandates a new direction for the center. Here, this first volume ends, with the tale to conclude in a second book. As usual with the work of Schuiten and Peeters, architectonic marvels akin to Piranesi's complement the witty and enigmatic text, producing a world so tangible that you'd swear you could step directly into it from the page.

Two small magazines deserve plaudits for meaty issues. The more established one, *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet* (Small Beer Press, chapbook, $4.00, 52 pages, ISSN unavailable), now in its eleventh issue, features work this time from Molly Gloss, Mark Rich, and L. Timmel Duchamp, among others. I particularly enjoyed Sarah Monette's fey eroticism in "Three Letters from the Queen of Elfland." *Say . . . Was That a Kiss?* (Fortress of Words, chapbook, $5.00, 68 pages, ISSN unavailable) assembles strong stories and poems from Scott Westerfeld, Richard Butner, F. Brett Cox, and over a dozen other talents. And Jeffrey Ford's "The Chambered Nautilus" makes this issue a must-have.

Bruce Boston's latest long poem, *She Was There for Him the Last Time* (Miniature Sun Press, chapbook, $5.00, 15 pages, ISBN 0-9676666-9-4) is a panoramic survey of the continuum-sprawling career of a fabulous Belle Dame Sans Merci who crops up amidst Armageddon and peacetime, offering both solace and despair. For some reason, I kept humming Neil Young's "After

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the Gold Rush" throughout the reading of this gorgeously tumultuous ballad, which for all its savagery shares some of the winsome melancholy of Young's song.

Poetry of a vastly different stripe is to be found in Bryan Dietrich's *Krypton Nights* (Zoo Press, trade paper, $14.95, 54 pages, ISBN 1-932023-00-3). Dietrich derives his inspiration from, of all things, the Superman mythos. Out of the canonical DC texts, he elicits touching poems that delve into the inner feelings of the Man of Steel, Lois Lane, Lex Luthor, and others. Dietrich's larger meditations on social responsibility, true and false identities, and the nature of evil are couched in simple yet affecting language, sometimes formally arranged into sonnets. Like the four-color revolution of Frank Miller or the randy speculations of Larry Niven on the same subject, Dietrich's poems prove that pop mythology flows surprisingly deep.

Don't you wish there was a new bracingly antiseptic J.G. Ballard novel out right now? While you're pining, why not read the latest kindred philosophical speculations of Paul Virilio, as found in *Crepuscular Dawn* (Semiotext(e), trade paper, $12.95, 187 pages, ISBN 1-58435-013-X). Virilio has a similar angle of attack on postmodern existence, charting the psychic shoals and reefs of our media-dominated, war-crazed globe. Subtitled "Accident, Architecture, Apocalypse," this book is chockful of startling insights into stefnal concerns, from cyborgs to "transgenic art." With an introduction by Sylvere Lotringer, this volume cruises the heady stratosphere of apocalyptic rant, heart-on-the-sleeve jeremiad and cool-headed Cassandra warnings.

Fiction writer Darrell Schweitzer reveals himself in *Speaking of the Fantastic* (Wildside Press, trade paper, $16.00, 202 pages, ISBN 1-59224-001-1) to be a talented interviewer as well. This book collects eleven conversations Schweitzer has held with various authors over the past decade and a half. We hear lamentably lost voices—Fritz Leiber, Marion Zimmer Bradley, John Brunner—and vibrantly alive ones—Terry Bisson, Jonathan Carroll, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Dan Simmons. In all cases, Schweitzer reveals a respectful knowledge of his subjects' work, and manages to get his interviewees to disclose all sorts of fascinating tidbits. Brunner's irritation with the fame of his *Stand on Zanzibar* (1968) and Le Guin's embracing attitude toward appropriate technology are typical of the kind of unpredictable insights Schweitzer manages to provoke. Place this one alongside Charles Platt's two *Dreammakers* books from 1980 and 1983.

The parallel histories of comics and SF are intertwined inextricably, proof of which—along with many other delights—is on display in *Gil Kane: Art and Interviews* (Hermes Press, trade paper, $27.99, 200 pages, ISBN 0-9710311-6-9). This book consists of four interviews: an extensive one with Kane, then three supplementary ones with Julie Schwartz, Roy Thomas, and Ron Goulart. And of course, hundreds of B&W illos, plus a lavish insert of color art, provide the context for the fascinating discussions herein. Editor/interviewer Daniel Herman does a splendid job of summarizing Kane's majestic career in his introduction, then manages to elicit valuable insights from Kane and the others, regarding Kane's un-

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equalled mastery of the comics vernacular. Kane, who died in 2000, was a very conscious artist, always striving to do more with his gifts, and his legacy is astounding. When Kane seeks to epitomize his accomplishments by saying he always sought "grace and power . . . a primitive lyricism . . . to express the sentimental fall [of the character]," we can only nod our heads in awe.

First published in 1917, *The Supernatural in Modern English Fiction* (Lethe Press, trade paper, $19.95, 329 pages, ISBN 1-59021-001-8) remains as compulsively readable today as it must have been upon its debut. Author Dorothy Scarborough (1878-1935) was no fusty academic, but a novelist herself, and her wide-winged survey is presented in vivid, captivating fashion. Organizing her material according to tropes, themes, and styles, Scarborough begins with the Gothics, then rapidly approaches the work of her contemporaries, with stops along the way for Poe, Hawthorne, Dickens, and other famous figures. But while well-known names are invoked—Blackwood, Machen, Bierce—the lesser names hold even greater fascination. Her treatments of semi-forgotten authors such as Barry Pain assume majestic outlines, and inspire the twenty-first-century reader to do a little digging for the work of these neglected laborers in the gruesome vineyard. Chapter VII, "Supernatural Science," brings Wells and other early SF writers into the fold in an interesting manner. "Man must and will have the supernatural in his fiction. The very elements that one might suppose would counteract it—modern thought, invention, science—serve as feeders to its force. In the inexplicable alchemy of literature almost everything turns to the unearthly in one form or another." As true today as it was nearly a century ago.

Publisher Addresses

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

Join the Toronto WorldCon by mail or Web right away, or pay more at the door. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

JULY 2003

11–13—**Shore Leave.** For info, write: **Box 6089, Towson MD 21285.** Or phone: **(410) 496-4456** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). **(Web) www.shore-leave.com. (E-mail) information@shore-leave.com.** Con will be held in: Baltimore MD (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Hunt Valley Marriott. Guests will include: Star Trek and other media SF/fantasy personalities.

11–13—**ReaderCon. www.readercon.org.** Marriott, Burlington MA. Hal Clement, Rudy Rucker, Howard Waldrop. Written SF.

11–13—**ShowMeCon. www.showme.com.** Sheraton, Earth City MO. Tim Zahn, Alan M. Clark, Tim Bolego, Dick Durock.

11–13—**Toronto Trek. www.icomm.ca/tcon.** Regal Constellation, Toronto ON. James Marsters, J. C. Brown, Erin Gray.

11–13—**Follow Your Heart. (408) 448-3130.** Crowne Plaza Union Sq., San Francisco CA. Beauty & the Beast TV show.

11–13—**SciFi Expo. (972) 578-0213. ben@scifiexpo.com.** Civic Center, Richardson (Dallas) TX. Commercial media meet.

11–13—**ConStruction. www.dragonevents.ltd.uk.** Hanover Int'l. Hotel, Cardiff. Convention managers meet to talk shop.

17–20—**ComicCon. (619) 491-2475.** Convention Center, San Diego CA. Neil Gaiman. One of the biggest.

18–20—**ConEstoga. (918) 445-2094.** Sheraton, Tulsa OK. David Brin, Esther Friesner, David Lee Anderson, Keith Birdsong.

18–20—**G-Fest. www.g-fan. submissions@g-fan.com.** Radisson, Arlington Heights (Chicago) IL. Media.

18–20—**AnthroCon. www.anthrocon.org.** Adam's Mark, Philadelphia PA. Guy Gilchrist. Furries.

18–20—**ConCertino. www.concertino.net.** Crowne Plaza, Worcester MA. The Bohnhoffs, Neely. SF/fantasy folksinging.

18–20—**ConStrict. (702) 249-6218. www.randomadventures.com.** Embassy Suites, Las Vegas NV. Adult media 'zines.

18–20—**Japan National. Con. www.t-con2003.gr.jp. contact@t-con2003.gr.jp.** Shiobara-cho, Tochigi, Japan.

18–21—**Khan. (719) 597-5259. www.angelfire.com/scifi/xkhan.** Ramada Inn, Colorado Springs CO. John Stith.

19–20—**SpaceCon. ellen99@tampabay.rr.com.** Radisson, Portland OR. Zenia Merton, Barry Morse. Space: 1999 TV show.

19–20—**Vulkon BuffyCon. (954) 441-8735.** Airport Hilton, Tampa FL. James Marsters, J. C. Leary. Commercial event.

25–27—**LibertyCon, Box 695, Hixson TN 37343. (423) 842-4363.** Ramada So., East Ridge TN. The 2003 DeepSouthCon.

25–27—**ConFluence, Box 3681, Pittsburgh PA 15230. trfn.clpgh.org/parsec/conflu.** Sheraton. A. Steele, N.L. Freeman.

25–27—**BotCon, Box 240619, Rochester NY 14624. www.botcon.com.** O'Hare Hyatt, Rosemont (Chicago) IL. Media.

25–28—**MythCon, c/o 1603 Rosewood Dr., Brentwood TN 37027. www.mythsoc.org.** Nashville TN. Tolkien.

30–Aug. 3—**qep'a'wa'maHDIch, Box 634, Flourtown PA 19031. www.kli.org/stuff/qepa.** In PA. Klingon language.

31–Aug. 3—**PulpCon, Box 1332, Dayton OH 45401. www.pulpcon.org.** Convention Center. Old pulp magazines.

AUGUST 2003

1–3—**TrinocCon, Box 10633, Raleigh NC 27605. www.trinoc-con.org.** Marriott, Durham NC. L. Watt-Evans, B. Baugh.

1–3—**ConChord, Box 61172, Pasadena CA 91116. www.nyx.net/~bgold/.** Woodland Hills CA. SF/fantasy folksinging.

1–3—**FanEx, 9721 Britinay Ln., Baltimore MD 21234. (410) 665-1198.** Days Hotel, Timonium MD. deSouza. Horror film.

1–3—**Creation, 1010 N. Central Av., 4th Fl., Glendale CA 91202. (818) 409-0960.** Las Vegas NV. Commercial event.

1–3—**Costume College, Box 3052, Santa Fe Spgs. CA 90670. www.costumecollege.org.** Van Nuys CA. Masqueraders.

1–3—**Finland Nat'l Con., c/o TSFS, PL 538, 20101, Finland. www.finncon.org.** Eurocon 2003. M. Swanwick

28–Sep. 1—**TorCon 3, Box 3, Stn. A, Toronto ON M5W 1A2. www.torcon3.on.ca.** Freas. WorldCon. C$275/US$185.

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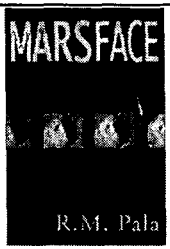

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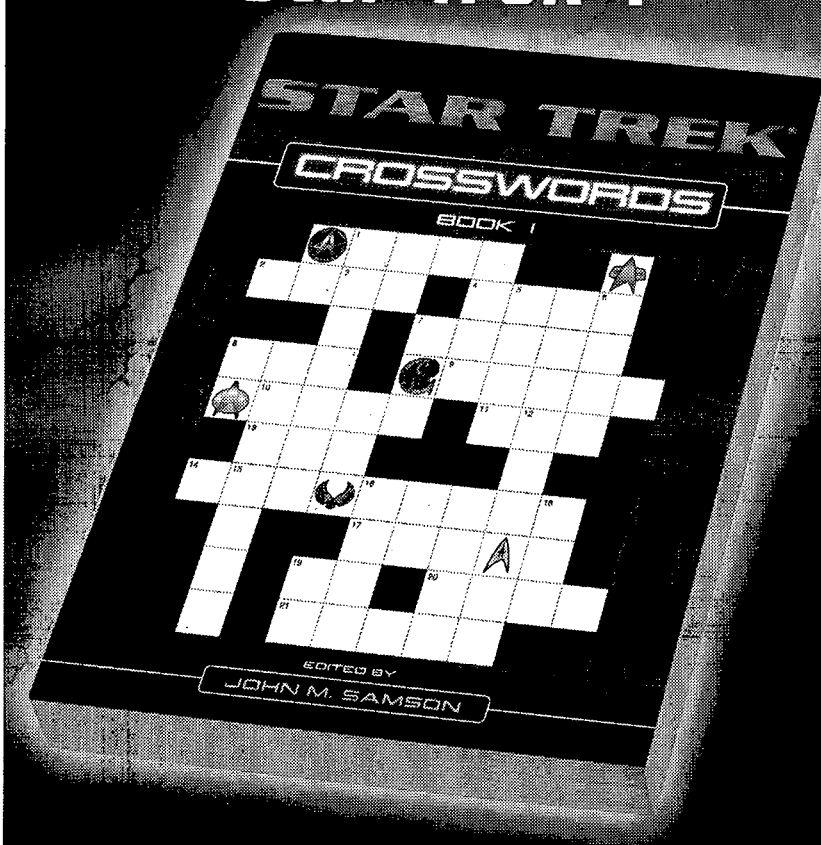

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